

DOWN THE CHIMNEY

Martijn van Nieuwenhuijzen (1999)
Translated by Robyn de Jong - Dalziel

From: Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, *Newsletter* (no. 46),
Also published in: 10 years SMBA/We Show Art, Catalogue: Stedelijk
Museum Bureau Amsterdam (93/03)

Down the chimney is the title Jennifer Tee has chosen for her exhibition at Bureau Amsterdam. A title which, like 'Through the Looking-Glass', refers to a passage, a transition to an unknown reality. 'A journey through a twilight zone where tangible reality shades into an imaginary world,' according to Tee. The anteroom to the dreamlike environment Tee has installed in the main hall is a jungle. The foyer of Bureau Amsterdam has been transformed into a claustrophobic terrarium, the space crammed with plants from the local garden centre. White fluorescent tubes cast a ghostly light over visitors' faces. Crouched down in the wilderness is a human figure sporting a white duck's tail and duck mask and looking somewhat nervously over its shoulder. A photographic portrait of the artist as 'sitting duck' – a decoy, or rather ruffled game, for the creature's backside is peppered with shot. The artist is present in the foyer in another, similarly absurdist incarnation: as a performer in a video. In this video Tee is seated on the floor of a large room with her back to the wall and a frying pan and a green plastic switchboard near to hand. From the other side of the room a tennis ball cannon is pelting her with onions. An agitated Tee alternates between trying to orchestrate the cannon's attack using the switchboard and fending off the onion onslaught with the frying pan. This bizarre game of onion tennis is at once perversely masochistic, because of the self-directed aggression, and rather comic, owing to the slapstick gestures with which the slightly built protagonist seeks to defend herself against the vegetable bombardment.

Once visitors have been somewhat unsettled by these images and the bright light, it is time to proceed to the main hall. But the entrance is barred by a huge curtain that steers visitors around the back. Having entered the exhibition space via this somewhat unconventional route, visitors see a dreamlike landscape unfold before their eyes. A ghostly realm where loom groups of ungainly, penguin-like creatures standing stock-still beside the upturned buckets that serve as seats for visitors. A tunnel-like form shoots down from the roof. On randomly placed 'ice-berg' panels an image is projected of a figure in a fur coat, its face enigmatically averted from the viewer. At the back of the room, ensconced in a huge bed, a grotesque turtle lies snoring. For a moment the bed

beckons invitingly but then attention is diverted again by the hectic video images that flicker over the walls. Three simultaneous video projections show a series of scenes in which costumed figures chase one another, fight fierce stick battles and engage in other strange games. All with that same raw energy and speed so familiar from slapstick films. As such, 'Down the Chimney' is a layered and eccentric visual experience - daylight drop into the land of fantasy, dreams and nightmares.

Tee's installation in Bureau Amsterdam is typical of the 'all over' approach with which she has been experimenting since graduating from the Rietveld Academy. Her aim is to create 'a total world that carries the viewer along with it and presents them with the choice: either accept and submit unreservedly or walk away'. It is an approach that accords with the current practice of artists both at home and abroad in whose installations objects, sculptural elements, props, video, photography and performance-type behaviour interact. The basis for their 'environmental works' lies in everyday, personal experiences and observations. The Swedish critic and Manifesta organizer Maria Lind recently characterized these spatial stagings as 'ambient spaces'. Atmospheric spaces that convey the viewer to a place which, though it differs in every respect from reality, often has its basis in details from that reality. As examples Lind mentions the installations of Tobias Rehberger and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. Lind: 'They contain a vision of another, liberating condition based on an intensively individual experience, involving as many senses as possible. It is a trip to somewhere else.' (1)

Tee's work, like that of the artists mentioned above, is personal and autobiographical. For example, the three-part video work that is at the heart of 'Down the Chimney', is rooted in the rituals and private mythology of the Tee family: father, mother and two daughters. Tee: 'Family ties are an extraordinary phenomenon. You have an automatic rapport with your family. However different you may be, you are loyal and tolerant about one another's foibles. Even so, you may wonder whether you really know the most important people in your life. To what extent are mutual relations laid down in patterns and rituals and do they ever change?' To gain insight into the psychological motives and codes that make the Tee family tick, Tee sent her parents and sister a tape recorder with the request to fill a 60-minute tape with the stories they usually keep to themselves. In other words, not the standard fare of family get-togethers but important events, memories and obsessions that for whatever reason (preserving the status quo, for example) are usually suppressed. From these revelations Tee selected the most visually powerful moments and incorporated them into the script for the videos. Using narrative structures borrowed from violent, East European folk tales and dramatic techniques like exaggeration, Tee, her parents and her sister acted out these scenes in front of the camera. The videos, which contain similar footage slightly differently put together, show

a rapid succession of scenes in which a group of individuals got up in animal suits, fairy-tale dresses and other fancy costumes, indulge in wild games of musical chairs, stick fights and other activities that are midway between good clean fun and cut-throat competition. Short, poetic shots of a river landscape or a figure gazing at the moon from the roof of a house and are intercut with eerie images from Marcel Camus' cult film, *Black Orpheus* (1959). The rapid montage of the videos is related to Camus' compulsive retelling of the Orpheus myth against the background of the carnival in Rio. The complex visual fabrics of Tee's videos completely transcend the private details from which they are woven; they overwhelm the viewer with their visual richness and the pulsating rhythm of the editing.

Tee's Bureau Amsterdam installation expresses a clear position on art. Her work relates to the immediacy of the 'ambient space' which demands that the artwork should exist as concretely as possible in reality (the physical world) while creating another reality. The public, rather than standing in front of it, finds itself inside the artwork and becomes part of it. In the mingling of different time experiences - the real time of the viewer in the room and the 'reproduced' time of video and photograph - and her dual role as maker and model, Tee's work links up with the traditions of performance and conceptual art. But the absurdist undertone and the artist's strange psychological preoccupations give the work a special meaning of its own. 'The specific gravity of artistic representation' (to quote Ger van Elk) is weighed once again in her work, with energy, directness and humour, and 'placed in the balance', which in Dutch as in English means 'taking a risk'.

(1) Maria Lind, 'Spatial Facsimiles and Ambient Spaces,' *Parkett*, no. 54. 1998/9, p. 194.