

An echo stronger than itself

Engagement is no small thing. In its most direct version, it still entails the promise to get married. And with that, the promise to care, to lavish with affection, to persevere in dreadful times, to not leave when the going gets tough.

To talk about engagement to a concept or an ideal, then, means to talk about strong feelings, commitment, and loyalty. Engagement tells us something about the quality or intensity of one's relationship to something. In itself, it tells us nothing about where this connection runs to.

Or its reciprocity, for that matter.

To put it bluntly, one can be engaged to anything from the White Cube to Civil Society or bananas or making weirdly shaped objects out of discarded paper-clips. And all of these relationships may be rewarding and meaningful.

What is special about Terrarium, is the hopes and efforts of this project to transfer the engagement of the artists to their visitors. Visitors who would, ideally, become participants. Their desire to achieve this was a desire they arrived at independently and unsolicited. They did not want to build and show, they wanted to have a long conversation with people they didn't yet know. A conversation which addressed the senses of the would-be participants as much as their conscious minds: A conversation through mud, music, oil, and pastries.

Their proposal caused much discussion between Daniel Dennis de Wit and myself, who were then curators of HMK. One was against, the other in favour. The key point was not the participatory element, which we both liked, but the fact that the project had a decidedly civil agenda with almost pastoral elements. It could have been proposed by an environmental committee, if not for its definitely craft-driven and spiritual take on the matter. Did we want our visitors to be immersed in such directive actions?

There is a weariness of engagement: our minds are tampered with on a daily basis, and we arm ourselves against the onslaught of carefully crafted and well-aimed advertising and other solicitations. The calls to "participate" in previously designed moulds serving an alien (and often undisclosed) purpose, the hijacking of genuine sentiments only to have them tossed back at us in a perverted version¹: To be wise to these traps means to no longer take the bait, and that, in turn, means dulling our senses and our ability to be drawn in.

We habitually outsource many parts of ourselves and our lives to others: when we perform a job, its ethical consequences are the responsibility of our superiors or the law, and we skilfully ignore the occasional pang of guilt. When watching a movie, the music guides our reaction before we form our own response.

The trick with engagement is that we can get used to its absence. It is like a transparent cloak which may be placed over any human activity: Without it, the world becomes frosted and subdued. But it keeps spinning, and we might tell ourselves nothing is wrong.

Our capacity to engage with our surroundings and each other in a meaningful way is too important by far to give it away. We need all the courage and love we can muster up – to feel the wind, meet each other, explore, fail hilariously, scrape ourselves together and start again. To build weird and wonderful worlds to the best of our abilities, or to simply enjoy being around.

If I look at the art world, it seems to be (amongst many other things) a house for thoughts and projects that cannot find a home elsewhere. A place for renegade ideas.

This makes it my favourite place to dwell in. Weird or surprisingly logical lines of thought are followed through. New collaborations arise. By looking at the arts one sees what might be, could

¹ For instance, during the Obama election campaign Dutch postal company TNT services started using the slogan "Sure we can."

have been, or what also exists but is hidden, waiting to be drawn out by someone not in a hurry. A process requiring skill as well as patience.

By looking at what goes on in the arts, then, one also catches a glimpse of what doesn't have an opportunity to show its face elsewhere. And sometimes this paints a striking picture of what is lacking.

With that, I finally return to Terrarium.

What made us decide to support Terrarium was the fact that their call to engagement was one springing from human concern laid bare. An agenda they owned up to and made available for discussion – not persuasion.

Terrarium directed itself at private conscience, thereby hoping to strengthen and reactivate it. They wanted to make us feel that part of ourselves again. They played around with it, serenaded it, even gave it mathematical puzzles to solve. But most of all, they reclaimed it as part of ourselves, something not to be tinkered with with lousy intentions. In this way, they sought to restart again an essential conversation we stopped having in our communities: How we want to live with each other and the world. That we are having this conversation in an art venue and not in a community centre, is telling.

To me, the value of Terrarium is in its playful and physical addressing of the conscience. This project was like the seedbombs it produced: Simple, modest, a bit dirty, and bound to result in flowers in unexpected places. It is also a calling-out that is hoping to cause an echo stronger than itself.

It is saying: Please, experiment. Meet each other. Fail hilariously. Scrape yourself together, and start again.