

Exercising Time  
Visitor Account on Sara van der Heide's  
*Mother Earth Breathing*

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Visitor account on *Mother Earth Breathing* by Sara van der Heide  
30 November 2014

Sunrise, 8.24am

(*Mother Earth Breathing* was presented the previous afternoon as well: at sunset, 4.33pm)

A wintry Sunday morning, 8.20am. Instead of delaying the day for as long as possible, I am in a darkened room, searching for a spot on the carpets that are spread out on the floor, while I wait for sunrise and for Sara van der Heide's *Mother Earth Breathing* to start.

On this fourth Performance Day I left my house in the dark, half-asleep, and biked through a city that was caught in a rare quiet – Saturday night has ended; Sunday is yet about to start. Amsterdam rarely is this still, and, even though I struggled to get out in the cold, I start to enjoy the calm. For once the city is not shaped by traffic and people, and somehow it feels more spacious. The icy air wakes up my skin. The smell of frost. From far away I hear the shriek of a bird.

I sit down and look at the people around me when a projector turns on and shows an image on the screen at the short end of the room: a close-up shot of wet, greyish brown earth. The soil opens and a glistening worm appears, shuffles around, and dives back in. The first task of a gardener: preparing the earth. After a few seconds the image cuts to another close-up: a budding flower, tugged by the wind. Another cut: an insect bridges a hole in a leaf, its thin legs like stitches. Then

some more distance: a tree, some shrubs, the enclosure of a garden. In complete silence – enhanced by the humming of the projector and the quiet breathing of the people in the room – a year passes by in fragments: buds and sprouts, lush flowers in vivid colours, shrivelling petals, stormy wind, yellowing leaves, the movement of the earth. Wholly unspectacular, yet none of these images are static; everything quivers and trembles. Dapples of light break the shadows. Bugs, ducks, and a dog move about. Images of the sky, crossed by birds and an airplane, open up the perspective. Down in the garden muddy black leaves turn into soil. Frost covers the branches. Colours fade. Threaded throughout this year other cycles emerge, of moon phases, daybreak, the blooming and withering of a single flower.

Time appears as unregulated, unmeasurable, happening in many dimensions at once, speeding up and slowing down, while being part of one continuous movement. Time happens - as much in the small events of growth and decline, as in the gaps and silent intervals.

An echo from the previous days: 'name me a time and I give it to you', Emily Roysdon said, and at night, in her performance *Uncounted\**, many different times entered the stage. The uncounted escapes regulation. In her reflections she proposed 'collectivities instead of collections'.

Most of us back in the room are lying down on the carpets, finding comfortable positions in between sleeping and waking. The image turns to a worm again, as it breaks open the earth, prepares it for seeds to sprout. A change of projection makes us move too. Sara walks up to the long end of the room, and lies down underneath another screen. She does nothing, just lies there and breathes. And for a moment this breath is all I can see: it moves her chest up and down in a slow and relaxed rhythm. Soon images appear on the screen, watercolours of geometric figures on coloured backgrounds that flow one into the other: circles changing colour, tone, shape, and size, then triangles, and from triangles to squares. Reminiscent of geometric investigations in abstract and modernist art, they evoke a much older use of images too, ritual and sacred. As the figures slowly transform, it's hard not to read them as the mental images of this breathing body underneath.

The previous nights resonate again: Grant Watson remarked how the interviews he did in his research project *How We Behave* were all grounded in some kind of practice – of working, reading, exercising, note taking, sex; and how spiritual practices that are rarely talked about continuously entered the conversation. In one of his videos, theorist and filmmaker Jean Matthee spoke about meditation. In another one, cultural theorist and editor Sylvère Lotringer recounted his exercises in fasting, to cope with any possible situation he might face. As part of her research for *Mother Earth Breathing* Sara studied meditation and breathing with the yogis Vijay Gopala and M.K. Nagaraja Rao. Far from being a hidden layer of spiritual practice, these experiences seem to be at the core of her project. Her 'metaphor of breathing' is a practice of observation and a thoroughly simple act of connecting: a way to relate to, calibrate with, and tune in to what is outside of the self.

More echoes: in her lecture Chus Martínez spoke of the end of 'the era of judgement', and how the only possible action might be finding a different routine. She proposed a rainforest as thinking exercise, as a destabilizing routine, and as a way to envision nature and culture intertwined. She suggested that being unintentional might not have to exclude being rigorous and political too. How intentional is breath? Can lying and breathing – just doing nothing for a while – be a routine? Chus continued and talked about procrastination. Throughout these

days, performance appears as practice; as exercise to counter the regulated linearity of systems (of politics, living, classification, productivity, and thought) that we find ourselves in; as a site for exercising theory and ideas in connection with bodies and lived time: different routines, possibilities of relating.

An inhalation turns into an exhalation turns into an inhalation: the time of breathing is a cyclical time. The last square on the screen fades. Its after-image disappears a few moments later. Sara gets up and walks out of the room. The window blinds are taken away and morning light floods the space. Most of us keep quiet for a little longer, stretch out, roll over, and stretch this time out of time – a silent interval of meditative slumber.

This visitor report by Annick Kleizen was written at the invitation of If I Can't Dance, and follows the presentations of Sara van der Heide's work *Mother Earth Breathing*, that took place at sunset (4.33pm) on Saturday 29 November and at sunrise (8.24am) on Sunday 30 November, during the Performance Days festival, 27 November - 3 December 2014, Amsterdam.