

VICIOUS CIRCLES:

CIRCULATION AND DEFIANCE IN THE WORK OF PUCK VERKADE

By Juliette Desorgues

The work of Dutch-born and London-based artist Puck Verkade is a process of self-reflexivity through image and space. Her first solo exhibition at Dürst Britt Mayhew, titled *Breeder*, comprises an installation and trilogy of videos called *Breeder*, developed over the past year, as well as an earlier video *Modes of Capture (Bang Bang)* from 2016. A web of pink, lilac and burgundy coloured steel rods engulfs the gallery space to form an imposing labyrinthine structure. The installation is interspersed by a myriad of different elements: plexiglass words that refer to ideas of 'girliness', latex screens that suggest different skin tones, and the four videos, presented on monitors and as projections. At the very basis of this installation, and which also underpins Verkade's practice at large, is the notion of cultural and social determinism and stereotypes in relation to race and gender.

The metal structures meander in the space; they disappear into its cracks and corners, only to then return, creating points of tension. This circularity becomes a recurring trope within Verkade's complex visual language. Taking its cue from Foucault's concept of circular power, based on the 18th century notion of the panopticon, a notion developed by English social theorist Jeremy Bentham, Verkade's installation reflects and denounces the complex power structures at play in today's image-led post-digital neo-liberal economy. The installation itself is punctuated by stools, thus involving the viewer in these processes of cultural codification. Verkade's visual tropes, particularly her videos, further underline these circular processes of power, of framing and unframing, by involving the viewer, herself as an image producer and the subjects in her films.

At the crux of the trilogy of video works is the theme of breeding, one which Verkade develops through found footage from popular culture and her own produced imagery. Here, the stereotype of the female body as a reproductive being is questioned and disrupted both through visual tropes and Verkade's own life experience. Underpinning the three films through covert personal dialogue recordings and re-appropriated found footage, is her experience of becoming a donor of eggs, a process which in its nature reinstates female essentialist stereotypes and further submits these to a capitalist form of exchange. Yet, again, the circularity of forms of oppression is confronted. Indeed, Verkade uses this process of egg donation as a form of defiance of society's expectation of women's roles as reproductive beings. The consultation with the doctor forms part of the voice-over in parts of the trilogy. She is asked specific questions

about her marital status, religion and other characteristics. Social and cultural determinism is here replicated in this very process of biological reproduction. We hear Verkade however question this and refuse to respond, thus tempering with forms of implicit social and cultural determinism in this very process of biological reproduction.

Verkade's trilogy of *Breeder* videos uses representations of women as sexualised objects found in visual culture in general, and particularly in music and film as common visual trope. Stereotypes of gender binaries are also pointed at through found footage of interviews with singer Boy George being questioned in TV interviews about his 'womanly' appearance. The cyclical flood of images is again thwarted through Verkade's complex filmic collage. Boy George retorts to the questions asked. The female icons become active agents as they navigate the space, against, at points, a backdrop of male domination and colonisation hinted by the superimposition of imagery taken of space conquests and microscopic views of sperm.

In the video *Modes of Capture (Bang Bang)*, shown in the first room of the exhibition, Verkade explores the idea of the camera lens as a vehicle for power relations. The film documents an altercation between the artist and a security guard at the entrance of a venue. The film plays with the idea of shooting, a nod to the camera's exploitative nature. The oppressed, seemingly Verkade as a young woman walking the London streets late at night, however becomes the oppressor when the man whom she thought was verbally attacking her, expresses his own feeling of harassment by Verkade herself.

The video *Breeder (episode 3, generational)* takes centre stage in the last room of the exhibition. Its opening scene shows three women of colour, performing the role of a Greek Chorus as background characters offering commentary to the images that unfold. In the context of ancient dramaturgy such a chorus would form a single distinct organism. The three women presented to us in the film, take on this characteristic through the similarity in their appearance and their concomitant speech. Ethical questions of instrumentalisation are raised here. However, far from being subservient, their roles serve to further undermine and question gender and racial stereotypes. Questions around breeding turn to the notion of breed. Indeed, in his *Difference and Repetition* (1968), French philosopher Gilles Deleuze distinguishes the idea of generality from repetition. Whilst the latter is governed by the laws of science, repetition however can be a form of transgression. He continues to describe how in fact humour and irony are rooted in the idea of repetition because they distance themselves from given norms even while re-enacting them.¹ This

mechanism is in many ways at play here in Verkade's work. If such a scene might be read as a reinforcement of the singular, cyclical nature of cultural determinism and stereotypes, Verkade's work however offers points of rift, partly through the use of humour and irony, that serve to undermine that very language. The three women's faces turn into chicks – an image loaded with gender stereotypes whereby the term 'chick' is also used in a demeaning way to refer to women, but which also here relates the idea of breeding to the female body.

The videos' collage of found footage and staged scenes is disrupted by unveiling points of interaction off-camera, where the three actresses retain agency. We see them interact on a personal level, laughing, sharing anecdotes. In another scene, one of the three actresses is seen eating fried chicken. As the camera continues to film, we witness the interaction between the filmmaker, namely Verkade, and the actress. The reality of such an image, loaded with racial stereotypes and complex power dynamics between the two individuals are laid bare when the artist herself realises her own position as a white producer and reenactor of such a problematic scene. The actress' own agency in this interaction is also shown however as we see her referring to the scene itself as not being problematic in her eyes. By choosing to include such a point of tension however, Verkade denounces and questions not only her own complex role in relation to such language, but also our own as a viewer. Other elements in the installation such as the latex panels that serve to delineate the space also play on the language of racist stereotypes often found in the fashion and beauty industries where darker skin tones are equated to terms such as chocolate. Similarly to these moments of rift in the videos, these panels disrupt the fluidity and circularity of the installation structure and confront the viewer with their own social and cultural biases.

The images in Verkade's filmic work whether found or produced, relate to some extent to Hito Steyerl's notion of the 'poor image' which she defines as being the 'debris of audiovisual production', 'dragged around the world as commodities'. For Steyerl, 'as it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution'. For Steyerl such an image is about 'reality' itself: 'the poor image is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation.'² Such a paradoxical rhizomatic system is laid bare and becomes a central trope in Verkade's work, both through

the videos and the installation itself. Whilst it is performed visually and spatially in the work, Verkade also carefully undermines its complex axes of power through glitches of (self-)questioning and resistance that reach beyond the work itself, thereby finding new grounds for understanding the dynamics and difficulties of our post-digital age.

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Juliette Desorgues is an independent curator, writer and editor. She previously worked as Associate Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, where she curated a number of exhibitions, commissions and events including 'in formation' (2017); 'Helen Johnson: Warm Ties' (2017); 'The Things that Make you Sick: Loraine Leeson and Peter Dunn' (2017); 'Everything is Architecture: Bau Magazine from the 60s and 70s' (2014); 'Bloomberg New Contemporaries' (2016 and 2015), 'Yuri Pattison: mute conversation' (2014). Prior to this Desorgues has held curatorial positions at the Barbican Art Gallery, London and Generali Foundation, Vienna.

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1. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, (London, Continuum, 2004), p. 6
2. Hito Steyerl, *In Defense of the Poor Image*, 2009 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>