

WERELDTOURNEE IN ANTWERPEN  
Benjamin Verdonck

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*Wereldtournee in Antwerpen* van Benjamin Verdonck is a production of Toneelhuis.

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# Poking a Hole in Reality

On friction and contradiction in the work of  
Benjamin Verdonck

Evelyne Coussens



Benjamin Verdonck is going on a trip, and he is taking with him... a box full of possibilities. Verdonck's *Wereldtournee in Antwerpen* acquired a different form because of the pandemic, but that was no disaster: after all, one of the ambitions of the project was to create space for the unexpected. In recent months, Verdonck's peep show boxes have left a trail of temporary cracks in our sense of reality.

*Wednesday, January 27*, a side street off Sint-Bernardsesteenweg in Antwerp's Kiel district. Community worker Emilie rings the bell at Bianca's house, rings again, but the front door remains closed. She takes out her cell phone and gets Bianca on the line. A few minutes later, a middle-aged woman appears in the doorway. She's had a rough day, she says. She's struggling with a rat infestation and her daughter's dog has been put down. Benjamin Verdonck, who has moved in closer along with musician Tomas De Smet, asks if she'd like to see something. Bianca nods.

Verdonck carefully places his wooden box on a beer crate, while De Smet starts strumming on his instrument. Verdonck begins to manipulate the strings that dangle from the box. At the top, geometric figures unfold, the sun rises in the sky, the outlines of a city appear. The music crescendos and moves toward a climax, Bianca filming it with her cell phone all the while. Then comes the only line of text in this *Gille Learns to Read* (2016): 'Asked what he would take with him if his house were on fire, Cocteau answered: the fire.' De Smet strikes a

final chord. The show has lasted three minutes. Bianca claps excitedly. ‘That’s so beautiful,’ she says. ‘It’s straight from the heart.’ Verdonck smiles and says goodbye.

*Wanderer, not tourist*

Metaphors about putting out a fire dominated the media the past year. More than anything, Cocteau’s brilliant phase illustrates how politicians kept fighting an immediate crisis, instead of tackling the cause of the fire: the much broader ecological catastrophe. The latter has occupied Benjamin Verdonck for most of his life, and the corona crisis forced him to rethink his *Wereldtournee in Antwerpen* according to the changed circumstances. Originally, the we ‘world tour’ was conceived as a slow movement through the city. Verdonck would travel for a whole year, not as a well-prepared tourist with a checklist to be ticked off, but as a wanderer who allows his encounters with people to lead him from one destination to another. The idea was to take the small installations and tabletop shows he has developed over the past two decades and present them in places where people gather informally, where there is an audience not yet aware of being an audience. Verdonck just might drop in and show them something.

One place would lead to another: a visit to a community centre would bring an invitation to a neighbourhood party and this in turn would lead to an evening with the Ethiopian community. The choice to take an unpredictable route through the (own) city has several reasons. First, the awareness of the ecological undesirability of touring

internationally, and the realization that the whole world is concentrated right there in this one city just as much as anywhere else. But also the desire to escape the confines - predetermined far in advance - of production logics and touring schedules. Large institutions, such as the Toneelhuis with which Verdonck is affiliated, make many things possible, but on the other hand they are inevitably constrained by a certain inertia. And thirdly, not unimportantly: Verdonck wanted to present the works he created in his studio in Kapellen in less evident contexts. To expose them to 'danger', both in terms of weather and audiences that are not art-related – the city as an exercise ground, aimed at testing the resilience of the work. Besides the dynamic of moving from one place to another in Antwerp itself, a movement would also emerge from the city to the studio, from the studio to the city.

But it didn't work out that way. Verdonck's wish to escape fixed production schedules was granted in a very radical manner. In March 2020, not only were all scheduled productions suddenly off the table, but also all opportunities for spontaneous encounters, in groups or individually. From then on, everything had to be reserved, planned, booked and curtailed. I join up with *Wereldtournee* at a time when the corona measures are at their strictest: in the public space, any gathering is out of the question; inside, simply nothing is allowed.

It is in this utmost impossibility that Benjamin Verdonck's *besoin* takes over from his *envie*. In their mutual interaction, both notions are as necessary as they are fruitful for

Verdonck's work. *Envie* is the desire to make something, to be an artist, to dive into a medium – that which mainly takes place in the studio. *Besoin* is the appeal that the city or society makes to Verdonck, a call that 'affects him and sets him in motion', as he says. Sometimes one drive prevails, sometimes the other. In that specific moment in time, a society full of isolated, imagination-starved citizens is calling for an intervention. And so Verdonck goes into the neighbourhoods. In cooperation with local associations and district workers, he takes his boxes door-to-door, performing for Bianca, for instance, and later that same day also in the entrance hall of the apartment tower in the Kiel district, where eight-year-old boys of colour are spelling out the name of the French playwright, letter by letter: *C-o-c-t-e-a-u*.

In this first movement of great *besoin*, Verdonck explicitly chooses places or neighbourhoods where people are vulnerable or where the arts are not much in evidence – the 'difficult' Sint-Jansplein; a centre for people with early-onset dementia; a location where meals are handed out, a neighbourhood with newcomers. With the help of a crane, he is lifted up in front of the windows of residential care centres, where he reveals his magic boxes. He often returns to the same places several times, not because he wants to 'steal' human material, but to engage with the place. This too is a deliberate challenge and stretching of the normal production logic of the institutional performing arts, according to which artists usually perform every night for a different (paying) audience. Verdonck returns to the Sint-Jansplein for three days in a row. Sometimes he is met with rejection, sometimes laughter, sometimes a budding interest.

Once in a while, he listens patiently to an incoherent story that someone tells him. But let there be no doubt about it: Verdonck is not an outreach worker. He doesn't pursue social goals, although he enjoys it when his art sparks a discussion or becomes part of a larger gesture that caringly envelops a vulnerable group of people.

### *Places of potential*

What Verdonck is primarily aiming for – whether it be on the Sint-Jansplein or in the Bourla Theatre – is the opening of a ‘third space’: an imaginative space where reality can be thought of differently, if only for a few moments. Where, as social psychologist Harald Welzer puts it, a hole is punctured in reality. Or perhaps, rather, a hole in the sense of reality that Robert Musil describes in *The Man Without Qualities* (1943), the firm conviction that, by definition, what is must always be so. Musil counters this sense of reality with the *sense of possibility*: the idea that the reality we experience is only one of many possible conceivable realities.

This is exactly what Verdonck has in mind with his ‘third space’. It is not a place of escapism, nor a place in which the resulting crack is immediately filled with a new, political narrative. The third space is a state in which no one asserts anything, in which no choice, judgment or opinion is required, but only a surrender to the experience of potentiality – in the hope, indeed, that the viewer will subsequently act on this experience.

Verdonck has been creating places of potential almost his entire artistic life, in different formats, both within and

outside of art institutes. In the late 1990s, at the invitation of the Brussels youth theatre Bronks, he builds a tree house in which he bakes pancakes for children who visit him. This was followed by *Bara/ke* (2000) on the Baraplein in Brussels and *hirondelle/dooi vogeltje/the great swallow* (2004) a giant nest perched 31 metres above the Anspachlaan. Each of these are enclosed spaces within the broader public space, large-scale viewing boxes, where on the inside something unfolds that withdraws from daily reality. At the same time, an immaterial web of stories and experiences is developing around the physical actions of which he is the centre, and these are as much a part of the work as the intervention itself. The passers-by who come home in the evening and incredulously tell their housemates what they have seen – ‘Yes, I swear, a giant nest hanging on the side of the building’ – contribute to the activation of Verdonck’s work. In the memories of the spectators, the possibility of the impossible takes on a life of its own. If Verdonck’s work is activist, however, this is not only because of his actions. The discourse that unfolds around each action is intended to incite people to act, and, like a manual, to ‘appeal to people’s own capacity’, as Verdonck calls it.

Seen in this light, Verdonck does not make political art – in other words, art that conveys a political message – but art that politicizes: it encourages us to see reality differently and take action in relation to that. The political potential of this work does lie in itself, but in how it interacts with its surroundings. Seen in this light, Verdonck does not make political art – in other words, art that conveys a political message – but art that politicizes: it encourages us to see

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Perhaps the culmination of Verdonck's politicising work in public space comes in 2009, with *KALENDER. 365 dagen actie in Antwerpen*. This is a daily succession of small or large actions or interventions that question the self-evidence of the capitalist urban environment – the giant apple and the egg on the roof of the Carrefour and the KMSKA have become iconic. At the same time, however, the project is a turning point for Verdonck, who gradually feels that his actions are starting to be 'welcome' as the result of being included in a more streamlined discourse of city marketing, and thus losing their edge. Has a giant bird crashed on the Meir, Antwerp's main shopping street? Oh, how cute, that must be that artist again. Moreover, even the most eye-catching interventions hardly succeeds in drowning out the billboards' commercial violence. This brings Verdonck to the realization that, if he doesn't want his art to be recycled as a comfortable piece of urban decoration, he has to go smaller. Smaller, more mobile, more flexible.

And so the small houses that Verdonck had been living in shrink to the size of viewing boxes, from which he himself disappears as an inhabitant. Their materials are poor: they are made as much as possible from cardboard, adhesive tape and recycled wood, not only out of ecological considerations, but also because Verdonck values that the materials themselves should be recognizable and accessible. In addition to the avoidance of waste, another factor playing a role in the reduction of scale is the consideration of the ecological

catastrophe. Verdonck regularly refers to the encounter with a philosopher he had in Berlin ten years ago. In response to the question, ‘What can we do to avert the catastrophe?’ - the man answers: *to withdraw gracefully*.

To withdraw means to occupy less space – literally, by making stage sets that are less big, but also figuratively, by moving ourselves as human beings from the front stage of worldly events to the back stage, as Bruno Latour, once again, puts it. Becoming humble, modest. Things we have long regarded as secondary are now allowed to speak for themselves: the winches, the curtains, the ropes, the lights. This also explains Verdonck’s role reversal: from a performer at centre stage to a facilitator who stays on the sidelines as much as possible. In 2014, *notallwhowanderarelost* marked the breakthrough of this approach, but in *Wereldtournee in Antwerpen* as well, it is the boxes that speak for themselves, not the artist.

### *Contradictions*

*Friday 9 May*, we are on the Theaterplein in Antwerp. A maximum of eight people are currently allowed to congregate outdoors. Officially, this square is a public place, but if you look closely, you will see that it mainly belongs to one group: the skaters. As Verdonck has experienced on his *Wereldtournee*, every ‘living’ place, theoretically accessible to all citizens, has its unwritten rules. On the Sint-Jansplein, with its burly inhabitants, he couldn’t afford to be too modest; he had to make himself a bit bigger. And when he and De Smet wanted to perform near the Krugerplein, some kids asked

them to pay for the privilege. Verdonck smiles at this reversal in the balance of power: the public asking artists for money. (No, they didn't pay, but they played anyway.)

And now here they are on the square, with a viewing box that adds yet another dynamic to the *Wereldtournee* – triggered, as always, by the combination of envie and besoin. Verdonck's collaboration with lighting designer Lucas Van Haesbroeck resulted in a new step in the development of his tabletop shows, in which colour and light play a major role. This first happened in *Regenboog* (2021), a large installation that was shown in the Bourla Theatre, but now Verdonck and De Smet try out a smaller version here on the Theaterplein. On the besoin side, the slightly less stringent corona regulations prompt Verdonck to try to unite people around a work of art once again, rather than simply offering it. After touring intensively with little show boxes like *Gille leert lezen* or *Modern Love Waltz*, here once again an increase in scale takes place: in the size of the work, in the interaction with the public, in the gesture.

Wait a minute – doesn't that contradict the credo of 'to withdraw gracefully'? It does. But that is that a problem? No. The concern and responsibility that Verdonck assumes because of his besoin consists not just of one thing but of many. A single strategy would imply that he pretends to know what should be done, but that kind of doctrinaire conviction is alien to him. So within his oeuvre, different works can quietly contradict each other. A little later, the door-to-door artist is standing on the Theaterplein with a large abstract installation. The specialist in tabletop shows

has just designed a gigantic diorama. The interventionist in public space retreats to the red plush of the Bourla Theatre. This volatility is not a dandyish pose of an artist who likes to be ‘contrarian’, but an artistic necessity. Verdonck realises very well that every trace of coquetry tames his art. If his work is to continue to politicize, it must continue to chafe, and so it must not become too popular. A typical example of this attitude was an early performance at the Oktober/Octobre festival in Brussels, just after 9/11. Everyone was reeling from the attack on the Twin Towers, but Verdonck and Willy Thomas decided not to mention it in their performance. Instead, they told animal stories by Toon Tellegen – warm, unifying stories, in which cake is eaten at the end. Verdonck and Thomas also served cake, the audience was deeply moved, until the festively flickering candles detonated a little bomb hidden in the cake. The room was in shock. For it is one thing to unify people, but it must not become too sweet.

Twenty years later, Verdonck is on the Theaterplein trying out something that he calls ‘my most festive viewing box ever’. The new installation is a continuum that requires hardly any commitment on the part of the spectator – a smidgen of curiosity is all you need to have in order to undergo the transformation from passer-by to audience. Verdonck pulls strings, De Smet plays music. The starting point for this mobile theater, Verdonck tells us, was abstract: things can happen at the front or the back, coté cour or coté jardin, a figure can appear or disappear. *That’s it*. Within these parameters, a sequence of shifting figures develops: panels that slide open and shut, frames that expand and

contract. Everything happens quietly, without hurry, without a message. I can sense a vague unease in myself, as if longing for a certain finality. When Verdonck slides open a number of panels hidden behind each other in an ever-deepening perspective, a tension emerges in the audience. What's hidden behind the last panel, beyond the furthest point of exit? An open space, a free space? A finiteness, an infinity? A possibility? (Or, more likely, a view of the skaters on the Theaterplein?)

But the last panel remains tantalizingly closed; the final, white backdrop is not opened. Of course not; the actual reality is not what we need to see – for that, all we have to do is look sideways at the square. What we need to see is precisely that white canvas, on which everything can still begin, and on which – and this is the consequence of our looking at it – something has to begin. The fact that I see this, and that my eyes meet the eyes of the spectators around me, and that all of those eyes see other possibilities, creates a feeling of great solidarity amongst us. How wonderful!