

Laudatio Barbara Visser

Your Royal Highness,
Your Excellencies,
Members of the Board of the Heineken Foundation and the Alfred Heineken Fondsen
Foundation, in particular their Chair, Mrs. De Carvalho,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear Barbara,

The jury of the Dr. A.H. Heineken Prize for Art is pleased to present the 2008 prize to Barbara Visser. The jury praises the wide-ranging form and content of her work and her consistently distinctive signature. Alienation from reality and the astonishing nature of reality are certainly not unfamiliar themes in contemporary art, but Visser uses them in her work in a distinctively creative fashion and with immense visual conviction.

Barbara Visser's photographs, videos and installations disrupt our patterns of expectations, sometimes very directly and sometimes more subtly. For example, her series *A Day in Holland/Holland in a Day*, 2001, shows what at first appears to be two Japanese tourists in a Dutch landscape, complete with windmill. In reality, the two tourists were Dutch actors whom Visser had disguised as Japanese tourists and photographed strolling around Holland Village, a theme park in Nagasaki.

In *Detitled*, 2000, Visser photographed battered icons of design furniture. She stuck a knife in the upholstery of a Martin Visser couch, similar to Lucio Fontana's slashed canvasses, and shattered Charles Eames chairs. In doing so, she robbed them of their value in the design world while simultaneously investing them with new meaning in a new context, for example as a work of art in a museum.

In *Lecture on Lecture with Actress*, 2004, Visser played an intriguing game with personal identity by having an actress comment on a video recording of another actress playing Barbara Visser. More gruesome was the pseudo-documentary *The World Belongs to Early Risers*, 2002, a series of photographs of a man sunbathing happily on the seashore while, a short distance away, photographers are snapping photos of a refugee who has washed up on the beach – or of an actress or model in that confrontational role. A recurring theme in Visser's work concerns the multiple levels at which images function and their questionable reliability.

Barbara Visser is a well-known name both in the Netherlands and abroad. She attended the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, Cooper Union University in New York, and the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht. Her work has been exhibited at museums and other prestigious institutions, including the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Witte de With in Rotterdam, GEM in The Hague and the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem. She has taken part in exhibitions in Tokyo and Auckland and exhibited at the Muhka Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp, the Büro Friedrich in Berlin, the Frankfurter Kunstverein in Frankfurt, and the Sao Paulo Art Biennial. De Paviljoens Museum in Almere organised an important retrospective exhibition of her work entitled *Vertaalde Werken/Translated Works 1990-2006*, accompanied by a publication (*Barbara Visser is er niet*). Visser has received the Charlotte Köhler Award in 1996, the David Roëll Award in 2007 and various other prizes.

I had a few months' time between the jury's decision and this award ceremony to ask myself how on earth a contemporary artist, Barbara Visser, had managed to give new meaning to a subject like alienation – a subject that unarguably ranks as one of the most hackneyed themes of twentieth-century avant-garde art. I recently accompanied a Dutch actor to an Absurdist play. As we sat there watching, he leaned back and sighed, "Alienation is *so* boring". So why is

Barbara Visser's perspective on alienation so exciting? Perhaps for the same reason that makes stories by Franz Kafka – the father of alienation – so exciting, even today. Both artists, you feel, are motivated by personal urgency. In Kafka's case, we know a lot about that personal urgency. Perhaps too much, in fact, as it becomes almost impossible to avoid *hineininterpretieren*. But we know absolutely nothing about the personal motives behind Barbara Vissers' work. And that may be a good thing, because "Barbara Visser isn't here". Her work is commendable without the jury needing all kinds of autobiographical mnemonic aids.

Prof. dr. Henk van Os,
Chair of the jury of the Dr. A.H. Heineken Prize for Art 2008