

# Interview with Levi van Veluw

## Valentijn Byvanck, 12 August 2015

### Beginning

'I started pretty young. In 2007, I graduated from the ArtEZ Institute of the Arts in Arnhem. I was 22 years old. I just started taking pictures. In the beginning, my work researched form and materials. I used my own face as a canvas for a portrait. By varying the material – wood, ink, stone or carpet – the portrait was given a new meaning. I began using different media. Besides photography, I also used drawing, video, and installation.

'In 2011, I built three versions of my boyhood room, for which I manually pasted the walls, floors, and ceilings with tens of thousands of pieces of wooden blocks, balls, and slats. The symmetrical forms symbolised my need for order and fear of losing control. The story I told with it was that as a boy I daydreamed about the shape of a cube. My father told me the perfect form didn't exist. Later, I built a new room and invited my family to be part of it. The combination resulted in a performance in which every family member was trying to relate to a 'perfect' family situation. The room was dark and claustrophobic, and no one spoke. It was a visual representation of underlying tensions and emotions.

'In my most recent works – charcoal drawings, installations, photographs, and films – the planning that was central to the earlier installations alternates with controlled chaos. In the most recent work, *The Collapse of Cohesion*, cabinets fall down, desks are blown over, and wooden slats float by in a dark universe. There's a controlled collapse of order. In this project's series of drawings, I attempt to register the transition between order and chaos. The paper enables me to completely control every detail of the chaos.

'Following the completion of a work I often feel a distance. I have made the art work with great care, and then it is out of my hands. I can print it out, put it in a frame, hang it. The only thing I can do afterwards is re-hang the work, paint the wall a different colour, or focus a spotlight on it. It is never going to be the world that I have tried to make. When it's in my head, these ideas are very immediate. I try to work them out as precisely as possible, but in the end it's just an image – like a photograph of a sculpture. Sometimes this can be very good, but at other times it can be also unsatisfactory.'

### Control

'In *The Relativity of Matter*, it's different. It's important that by immersing himself into the installation, the visitor experiences the artwork more directly. Everything around him is included. In a museum, a chair on the left or a fluorescent light hanging above can really irritate me. The surroundings really determine how the visitor sees the work. In *The Relativity of Matter*, there is only the work itself. I shut out everything in order to create a pure experience.

'A few years ago, I saw *Synecdoche New York* (Charlie Kaufman, 1998, ed.). The main character builds an entire world in a huge hall, and after a while you no longer know what's real and what's fake. Since seeing that film, I've had the idea in the back of my mind of wanting to build something absolute. When Marres asked me to use the house as a vehicle for my work, it provided the opportunity to carry out this idea. We first started thinking about the integration of drawings and collecting the work. Then, we very quickly came to the idea of a completely immersive installation. We've excluded all disruptive, everyday elements: sockets, doors, ceilings, windows, and external views.

'I had to be that totalitarian to create my own territory. It's the same as in your own home: you want to control your own space. But such a major intervention requires more persuasive powers. A photo of a floating cupboard is acceptable because the medium sits in-between. But when we find a real floating cupboard, the first thing we ask: where are the strings? With this medium, I need to think about everything, every detail influences the work. The sensory experience is much more direct.

'I'm made *The Relativity of Matter* purely for the sake of it, without compromise. All artists started out as children making something in their bedrooms. Many lose that feeling at art school. The work must mean something, the fun is gone and then they stop. I always search for the freedom to make my work exactly as I want it to be. Without external influences. That is very difficult. But when it works, it's quite pure.

'Imagine creating something you can completely lose yourself in. You enter a physical world, different from anything you know. You're floating through a black void and being sucked into something. An experience no one ever had.

'I realise that I'm confining the visitor in my own animated fantasy, but I've made it in such a way that the visitors can experience it their own way and give their own interpretation to it. My ultimate ambition is that visitors really enter my universe.'

## The Installation

'Making such an installation is far from structured. Before I started, each idea was about 30% complete. Once I began, new things were created and rooms were edited out. For this installation, I spent weeks working on a spherical ball of resin, with all kinds of matter floated. I saw it as an enigmatic image. In reality, it was no more than a ball of plastic with pieces of wood in it. I've rejected that room. In this work, matter should become something different from reality, something new. I look for materials that aren't immediately recognisable. I don't want the visitor to think about technique or material, or whether it's polystyrene or resin with wood.

'Every room in the installation has its own feel. In the beginning, I was thinking about names: the Collection Room, the Brain Room, the Archive. In an ordinary exhibition, you're in a domain created by the artist. But now, the visitor walks through my imagination. The form I've chosen is close to a cinematic built-up. The visitor walks from room to room and the route and speed determine the connection of thoughts. First, I'll take the visitor into a figurative environment that is still recognizable, human. Then, I let the environment overgrow the scene until it becomes completely abstract. What do these forms consist of? Lines or light? Is the matter there because light shines on it, or is it a plank of wood?

'It is important not to determine everything in a presentation. Yet, it is also unwise to leave everything open, because then the visitor will lose himself. The point is to suggest things. Create a balance, so that by showing just enough, the viewer can project his own fantasies and gain his own experience. I look for visual information that can't be immediately processed. If you see a grid hanging in the void, then you begin to wonder what you're looking at. This sounds like illusionism, but it isn't. Illusionism is about effect. In *The Relativity of Matter* it's not a question of things floating in the installation. It's about the feeling of a vacuum that exists because there is no top or bottom. I use the illusion to convey a feeling. It's about the laws of nature: the ordering of space by breaking the logic of the laws of gravity.'

## Matter

'I'm not an artist who works with current events. I create images in response to the questions I have. I've had these questions since I was a child. About, for example, the way matter is very relative. Does the volume of matter increase? Where does everything remain? A scientist searches for solutions. I cherish the feeling. I don't want to understand what it is, that time is relative, or that somewhere, time travels faster than it does here. That's something I can't comprehend. This feeling of incomprehension conjures up images that I'm translating into this work.

'I really like science fiction books from the 1950s and '60s. Prominent scientists wrote these as a hobby. I remember a very famous story about a black cloud (Fred Hoyle, *The Black Cloud*, 1957). A cloud descends upon earth and no one knows what it is. It turns out to be an organism with a collective intelligence. This is now a reality: a cloud that produces intelligence through the networking of systems. Or there's a story by Isaac Asimov, also a scientist, in which maths is forgotten. Then, someone rediscovers it. There's often a psychological dimension to them. What happens to people when they're put in certain surroundings or returned to the primitive? That world of technology – formulas, gas clouds – makes me feel that life is beyond comprehension. In *The Relativity of Matter*, the corridor is still recognisable in the form of an ordered archive. The Blue Room is futuristic. The ordering of spheres, boxes, and repetition, you can't relate to it. I'm trying to achieve a futuristic order that forces the visitor to balance between euphoria and claustrophobia.

'There are people who cannot look at the stars. They get so upset by the fact that they can't comprehend what they're seeing; they would rather not see it. It's scary to enter an unknown environment, such as in my installation: it's unrecognisable, unreadable, and it's dark. I once read a book in which the biggest punishment consisted of a machine that you enter, and for one second, before dying, you understand everything and it's too overwhelming. I think my work appeals to a kind of cosmic sense. We're all insignificant but we don't want to acknowledge it. We sometimes try to imagine something otherworldly, but it still ends up looking like something we know. '

## The Unknown

'*The Relativity of Matter* is not finished until someone walks through it. This is something new for me. It's about the visitor's experience, not mine. The work takes on a life of its own. Critics may wonder whether it's an attraction or entertainment rather than art. For me, it's primarily something that you have to experience and interpret in your own way. Many people will leave with questions. Maybe they'd like to ask me those questions, but actually, it's more fun if they keep them instead of having them answered.

'The installation invites viewers to momentarily exist in an alternate reality. Here is a link with the theatre. As an artist, how can you influence the viewer's emotional world? How can they be included in a staged reality? How can you construct this experience?

'In *The Relativity of Matter*, your body has to relate to the space. You can walk everywhere and there are no sudden surprises. Still, your body becomes aware of a different environment. In this context, it's interesting for me to engage with unfamiliar disciplines. For example, dancers relate differently to a space. They walk to a wall and feel the floor under their feet. They absorb the space. This is because, I think, they have a better sense of their surroundings. They are experts in the field. Imagine that you put a person in the installation. Not a formal dancer, but a person following precise instructions. How do dancers deal with that?

'The same applies to theatre. Imagine using actors, who through a script, relate to or become embedded in this space. Then the public could further loose themselves and the medium of the exhibition would slowly dissolve. Is it conceivable that visitors are completely absorbed into another reality?