**Sarah Vanhee about *Oblivion*, her new performance premiering on 12 November 2015 at CAMPO Ghent.**

CAMPO, 12 October 2015

**The starting point of this performance is holding on to trash, whether material or immaterial, for an entire year. Have you been consistent?**

The idea was to hold on to everything I would normally throw away. The most obvious of course is domestic waste, organic and inorganic. As I found out that organic waste is hard to keep, I started to take pictures of it. Because I washed my inorganic waste, touched it with my hands and kept it, I started developing some kind of affinity with my inorganic waste.
I also held on to immaterial 'waste'. I limited my selection to everything that had anything to do with creating *Oblivion*. This is a bit paradoxical: the moment you say something has no part in it, it starts becoming part of it, and then it becomes something.

In the beginning of the process I felt really rich, because I thought everything was allowed to be something, while a regular artistic process requires you to select and make choices, narrowing down your choice. Now I was allowed let my intuition run wild and collect associatively. Everything was possible, because everything was 'something'. But at a certain point this became rather problematic. How was I supposed to do something with this abundance? Then I started to get interested in the relationship that set this whole thing off. It is not about the material property of what superfluity I produce, but about my relationship with it. For example, why is it so easy to put things aside?

In the end I developed a natural way of looking at how I produced. After half a year, I came to the point where all I wanted to do is sit down on a chair to avoid production altogether. But even then, you are still thinking, still producing *(laughs)*.

For quite a while I wanted to show everything. But by using for example video as my medium I realised that this was impossible. Since everything in *Oblivion* has to be present in its own worthiness, I would've had to integrally play all eight films in my inspiration folder. This would've led to a performance that would last as long as last year.

Yet I did not want to sample. Eventually I found the solution in myself as a connecting element: I am the reason everything was brought here. From the metaphors about producing superfluity, I came up with a process of ingestion and excretion: I take everything there is, and then I give it back. At that moment, everything has been processed. The films are all present in this way or another, perhaps only by mentioning a title, or playing its music, but always in relation to the entire process.

The most important is that the connections remain intact. For example, I kept the e-mail conversations I would normally delete, but not all e-mails need necessarily be dealt with in the performance. The most difficult exercise remains to allow things to be present but realising that they need not be present in their entirety. That would overload the audience, and I want them to see and value everything.

On the other hand, I started to bestow extra value on all things (material or immaterial) I would normally not think twice about. I investigate the processes of reinvestment and reconnection. For instance, by talking to cling wrap and upgrading them to a serious conversation partner, they regain value. Another example: I started to continue working with a text I would've normally thrown out, in order to see what it would become.

The last part of the performance is the most 'processed' part: I wrote it intuitively and worked with ideas that kept bubbling up inside of me. An example: the quest for the *oblivious side of Western society*, the side we as a society do not want to be confronted with. The dark side of *Oblivion*.

An important issue is the difference between simply holding on to things you would normally throw away, and archiving everything. In *Oblivion*, it's not about archiving and documenting everything. This interview, for instance, does have a relation to the work, but it's more a document than something that has an active role in it. It is like a core with concentric circles around it, in which all items are stored. So it is naturally a huge challenge to stay connected to everything.

**How intense is it to constantly stay connected to everything?**

Somewhere in the process, I stopped hoarding everything for a month, just after I gave birth. Then I realised what a relief it was to be able to discard things. But at the same time, holding on to things is something which slows you down. It makes you do everything more consciously, because you know everything will stay. It also makes everything more valuable and more beautiful; I now see something in everything. And not only me, but everyone who was involved in this process, is now aware of how much we produce just to throw it away the next moment, on various levels: ideas, performances, work, relationships ...

Even though I try to remain connected with everything, everything is also interconnected, making it transcend me. Ever since, the work started shaping itself. And I had to start listening to what the things wanted from me, rather than what I wanted from them, however esoteric that sounds *(laughs)*.

**The things become your characters, your conversation partners ...**

Yes, and man becomes a little less central. Things suddenly become unpredictable factors - you have no idea how they will behave. Also, the build-up makes that they become more than just the sum of the parts: things multiply, reinforcing their significance. The performance transcends also the person thhat is Sarah: it departs from me, but it becomes much more than that, I'm just an example. It's about society, the West, the world.

**Did the hoarding process make you a more aware person? And did it change the way you live and work?**

I've learnt a lot from it, and I only became more critical of environmentalism. Everything which causes us to consume more, is to be suspected, even the idea of recycling: it's just a way that allows us to consume more.

But *Oblivion* does not actually touch on the superficial ecological discourse of for example recycling and green energy. In that sense, the performance contains very little moralism.

What is important for me is where the performance connects with previous projects such as *Lecture for Every One* or *Untitled*: the question that relates to 'society'. And, by extension, the idea of indigenousness For example, I read about the *First Nations*, a community of Canadian aboriginees who want to tear away from the Canadian colonial past. They want to continue feeling connected to their soil, but external influences interfere with this process. Even though you cannot undo the colonialism that brought about the external inluence, they are trying to return to their roots by cutting themselves loose. They call this process 'unlinking': leave us alone inside our community, with our water, our soil and our language. However damaged they may be, they always have a place to return to. But us, the aggressors, no longer have something like that. This is it for us, for instance this waste here. This is our earth, this is what we're supposed to make do with.

Within my art, I am also wondering: do we need to produce so much? Does anything really need producing, not only within art? Suppose we do not produce anything for five years and make do with whatever we have, simply allowing things to unfold? We live in constant anxiety of more and newer, everything is converging, everything is being squeezed.
Last year, I haven't created anything new, which allowed me to tour freely with *Lecture For Every One*. The space created by not producing gave me the feeling I was doing something valuable. I would call this ethically ecological.

Maybe I am now also more aware of the constant exhortations to produce. For example spin-offs of this performance. At the same time it's not because you do something more consciously, that you're doing a better job. You can't be consequent all the time. But sometimes I think we choose too rapidly. At Manyone (*the artist-run organisation that Vanhee is a part of, ed.*), we often consider this: you don't always have to say yes to everything, but it is sometimes nice to walk the way of least resistance. But how do you do this in an interesting way? Starting a debate about this often requires more work than solving it by yourself, so the dialogue needs to be worth your while.

**Do you advocate deceleration?**

No, I do not. But I do advocate themes I always end up dealing with: attention and care. Being able to do things with appropriate care. Before the consumer society came about in the 50s and 60s, for instance, various cultures had the phenomenon of the festival which celebrated abundance. The harvest festival is a good example: first we work hard and harvest, and then there's a Bacchanal. Abundance is accompanied by happiness. In today's consumer society, this abundance is constantly present, but we no longer experience it as a festival but rather as pressure, a bureaucratic necessity. The entire festive possibility of reaching abundance has also been lost. This, too, was an important approach for the performance: allowing the celebration of abundance to return to consumer society.

The performance was to deal with what normally remains invisible. However, when you talk about excesses, the tone easily turns moralising or destructive. But I simply wanted to observe and embrace these things. Making *Oblivion* a celebration of abundance. Also because I didn't want my thoughts to be constrained by that paradigm of "we need less" or "we need to slow down". I started with two drawings departing from 'waste': with concentric circles around negative connotations on one hand, and around festive ones on the other hand. Consumption, destruction, planned obsolescence on one hand, and abundance and the celebration of abundance on the other. The performance moves on these two axes.

But it is also about the subconscious, the immaterial. I even kept a 'shit diary' for a few months. Creating a language for something you normally do not describe, or grant exposure to something which normally remains hidden, is also a form of celebrating. I thought it was bliss to work with. Shit apparently never left the sphere of taboo the way that sex has. But what really happens with it? Where does it go, literally? Everyone contributes to it. Take a moment to think about it: we all want to know what happens to our tax money, but what really happens with what we give away for free, every day?

**Did you also record all your encounters you had with people, as you initially planned?**

No; although I do mention some people, for instance those who have very directly contributed to the production. But where do I draw the line? Do I also mention the human resources officer I barely talk to, but who does pay my salary? In the end, I did not try too hard to be correct about it. The audience may also be grateful that not everything is mentioned, because the list is endless.

**All your waste from the last year, collected in a mere 40 boxes. That doesn't sound like a lot.**

I only kept my personal waste: I discarded everything that my friend or son produced. We also postponed our spring cleaning, for pragmatical reasons. In the last year, I've not travelled a lot, which makes a world of difference. But I have been very consequent with domestic waste. I've photographed all organic waste, which will be on display in the foyer—without the smell, it suddenly looks really beautiful, by the way.
I would recommend everyone to hold on to their trash once in their lives, if only for a week. Only because you have to wash it, because you have to deal with it and because it takes up space in your house, it becomes something.

**In the past four years, you created a lot of in-situ work. Now you are again creating a performance for an audience.**

I often swing; I think both are necessary. It was time to go back inside. It's a completely different creation process. What do I do and in which context? For me, it was about this reversal: first to create something which is largely invisible outside the institute (e.g. *Lecture For Every One* and *Untitled*), and then bringing this invisibility inside the institute. In this way, both forms are equally political.

An audience also allows me to be purely artistic, giving all ideas a chance, without having to deal with the organisational side.
Both forms remain necessary to me, and they also reach different audiences. I expect to keep swinging between these two forms in the future. Certain things simply need to be brought before an audience, others need to stay outside.

In the last few years, especially with the government that we have, we feel the increasing call for art to carry social responsibility, taking the role of a social worker. I don't think art necessarily needs to do that. For me, art can simply be about imagination, and not about solving something that really is the responsibility of politicians.