

THE HOLY
SERIOUSNESS
OF PLAY

PAULIEN
OLTHETEN

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RITA HOOFWIJK

This paper is an accompaniment to the exhibition 'The Holy Seriousness of Play' by Paulien Oltheten at Centre Photographique Marseille. I imagine that you will be reading it at home, possibly days after your visit or perhaps sitting on a terrace somewhere in Marseille, in the sun. (I picture Marseille as always being sunny.)

Let me take you to a rainy day in Amsterdam, January 17, 2021. Paulien Oltheten and I meet in her studio, where we exchange ideas on miracles and delusions of reference, on faith and religion, creativity and art, healthy beliefs and dangerous belief systems. I am Rita Hoofwijk, an artist colleague of Paulien's, and in 2021 we have only recently met. But before I visit Paulien today, I have an appointment with another artist. Her name is Christina and we sit on a bench beside the IJ river in Amsterdam North. Covid is still (or again) present in our daily lives and meeting outdoors isn't exceptional. While she and I talk, a boat passes by. There's a name painted on the side of the boat. I notice it and point at the boat as it says 'Christina' and we laugh a little. Later, around 12:50, just when I'm about to leave, a second boat goes by. It's a smaller boat this time and the painted letters are red instead of yellow. They spell out another female name.

Paulien tells me when I arrive at her studio about her visit to Lourdes during the lockdown. She talks about her way of relating to the people she witnessed carrying out their religious devotion. She explains that while she may have the same belief as those she encountered, she is familiar with the phenomenon of synchronicity: the occurrence of meaningful coincidences without there being an explicable, causal

connection. Paulien encounters such apparent coincidences in her art practice and notes that art comes closest to being her faith. It makes me think of what Albert Einstein said, *"All religions, art and sciences are branches of the same tree."* When I search for the quote on the internet, I find: *"We do art when we communicate through forms whose connections are not accessible to the conscious mind, yet we intuitively recognize them as something meaningful."* I tell Paulien about her name on the side of the second boat. We laugh a little.

It's during this same studio visit that Paulien browses to LourdesTV for the first time. She has just learned about the existence of the webcam that streams the cave in Lourdes 24 hours a day. I'm intrigued by the liveness of it, the uncontrollability. My own work, unlike Paulien's, seldom leaves a (more) permanent trace, it exists merely in the present. We watch a woman standing alone in front of the Virgin Mary. A few minutes go by and Paulien and I stare at the back of this woman wearing a purple rain coat, while mine is dripping on a chair in the studio. Then she suddenly walks out of the frame and Paulien scrolls back in time to watch her walk out of it again. Scrolling back in time. Needless to say, it is impossible to scroll forward in this livestream, yet it is fascinating to watch the day slowly stretching out along the bar at the bottom of the screen.

Days later, Paulien leaves me a message stating that she has begun to watch LourdesTV extensively. She can sense that a work of art is to be found here: the candles are lit, a nun comes to prepare the table, the priest connects the microphone, the candles are lit again, the first visitor arrives in the morning, the Virgin Mary is present, and so is Paulien Oltheten. Scrolling back and forth until LIVE and back and forth again to another LIVE, listening-looking-waiting for something to intuitively recognize as being meaningful.

Miracles don't happen on command. The livestream footage is stored only for a limited amount of time. After twelve hours it becomes impossible to scroll back to past events. For Paulien Oltheten, this means that she has to be in front of her screen on a daily basis, devoting herself to watching LourdesTV.

On August 24, 2022, in a Facebook post about 'doing nothing', Rebecca Solnit writes:

"Take refuge in that beautiful stillness in which everything is happening in all the ways that nothing is happening in busyness. Everything

happening in the depths, the deep water under a reflective surface, a lake reflecting clouds with schools of fish in the depths. Seeds germinating underground.

“Sitting still as zazen or just daydreaming or watching clouds is an act of revolt against the shouts that we should be doing something/do more/do more faster that are all around us. If you find doing nothing is hard to do, it’s exactly because it’s this kind of revolt against the production/consumption juggernaut that is a kind of war against rest, depth and the earth. Inaction might be another face of peace in our ties with stillness, the ceasefire in which spring comes again.”

On February 11, 2022, I receive a small bottle of holy water from Paulien, a souvenir from Lourdes. It’s a gift to thank me for the studio visit a little over a year ago. She laughs when she hands it to me, as if she is not sure whether to take it seriously or not. Perhaps she is afraid that I will find it ridiculous. “It’s water,” she says.

This morning, March 27, 2023, I look at the bottle on a small marble table in my house. I keep it in the same place where I keep my most precious belongings: a drawing made by a close friend, a postcard from another, a stone that I once found on a beach that fits precisely in the palm of my hand. Perhaps you could even call this table an altar, and perhaps that’s why the bottle with the image of the Virgin Mary found a place there. Paulien explained to me that as long as it contains a single drop of holy water, you can always fill it up. The water will remain holy.

Today, at Paulien’s invitation, I’m writing this paper as an accompaniment to her solo exhibition at Centre Photographique Marseille. She has asked me to interview her, or “have a conversation about our work”, I think that’s how she put it. I feel honoured by her request. Ever since that first studio visit, I have become part of her journey through Lourdes and she has become part of my personal search for meaning, faith, chance and destiny.

Let us go back to a few weeks earlier, March 9, 2023. I have asked Paulien to meet me at Artis, Amsterdam’s zoo. I myself actually find it a strange place to meet, as it seems to have no immediate relation to the exhibition in Marseille. I had even thought of meeting her in a church or a chapel to have this “conversation about our work”, but it didn’t feel quite right. I have

wanted to see the aquarium in this zoo for a long time, and moreover, I wanted to have something to look at together with the artist, rather than directly at each other. I can’t think of another place (apart from the livestream) where you can watch and observe other living beings this openly, without them necessarily having given you permission to do so.

We meet at the entrance to Artis and, just after we pay for our tickets, the employee informs us that the aquarium is currently under renovation and will only open in a year or so. It’s raining. Neither of us is wearing a raincoat. It might be one of the worst days to visit a zoo, but we go in. We are here to talk about Paulien Oltheten’s art practice, about miracles that might happen.

At the lions

Two out of three seem to be sleeping. I remember once hearing that lions sleep around 20 hours a day. An information sign reaffirms it. Paulien has brought a voice recorder. I imagine the few other visitors think that Paulien Oltheten is some kind of expert on animals.

Paulien: “I went to a zoo in China once, in order to watch the people. When you are in a culture that is foreign to you, a zoo is a place you know. In a way, it’s easier to observe how people behave there.” She explains that in the beginning of her career she photographed or filmed close to everything. “Now, I’m more selective of where I let myself go....” (She laughs.)

Rita: “Do you think that everything could be interesting?”

Paulien: “I used to think that, yes. But not anymore. No, I don’t find everything interesting. However, when I’m touched now, I’m touched deeply. The experience lasts longer.”

The contexts in which Paulien Oltheten situates herself and allows her eyes to steer the camera have become more important over the course of her career. The details of life, the human behaviour, the images that Paulien captures share a similar quality, but the contexts in which she shoots them make up the bigger picture, so to speak. Her video installation La Défense, The Venturing Gaze is about individualism and capitalism. To Those That Will, Ways Are Not Wanting is about ecology and the climate crisis. Lourdes TV is about faith.

Paulien Oltheten listens with her eyes. As she grows older as a person and more experienced as an artist,

her images no longer stand alone. Each image connects the past (her archive of lived experiences and captured moments) to the present and the future, in which these images combined start to form a story, raise a question, reopen our eyes.

“To look at something as though we had never seen it before requires great courage.” - Henri Matisse

In front of the lizards

Paulien: “It is beautiful here, because you have the lizard’s wriggle and then the branch in the same shape.” Later she adds: “You have to do it with what happens inside the frame. This is it.”

On our way to the zebras

Rita: “I wanted to ask you about the state you put yourself in when you work. I would imagine that it would be important not to have an agenda in order to enter this state of being. But when I hear you now, about choosing your environment and so on, it seems to me that you have quite an agenda. Is that right?”

Paulien: “No, not while I’m somewhere on site or while I was watching LourdesTV. My gaze remains the same: open, more alert perhaps than usual, sensitive. I have created a frame, but within it I just try to be present, ‘in the now’, carefree. During the phase after this, while editing, the agenda returns. I find this the most difficult. At the moment, as I’m shooting and when I ‘have’ something, I know it. I know that I will use it. The trouble begins afterwards: How to present it, where, when?”

(We have arrived at the zebras.)

Rita: “Ah, this is a beautiful frame.”

Paulien: “Yes, a very beautiful frame, without zebras.”

Rita: “We are not very lucky today, are we?”

(a little later)

Paulien: “In a way, you do have to know what you are looking for. Sometimes I wonder: Do I believe enough?”

The turtles

Paulien: “Now that I’m in the editing phase, I miss the sense of timelessness, of scrolling, strolling, musing.

I wish I could take that attitude, that freedom with me to the editing phase, but it’s difficult.”

Rita: “The balance between steering and waiting. Doing something and doing nothing.”

Paulien: “How do these turtles live? Without any awareness of time?”

Rita: “Do you think so?”

Paulien: “Well, you can tell by the traces they leave in the sand that they have done something too.”

Rita: “Yes... it’s just how long you want to keep looking. When I’m in work mode, I have the impression that I see more, the world opens up in a different way, wider.”

Paulien: “Yes, yes, you have more antennas on. I mostly don’t see interesting things when I’m not working. Sometimes it happens, then I’ll arrive late somewhere because I saw something along the way. At this moment, I apparently don’t see that much. Hey! The turtle is moving.”

Next to the turtles, the chimpanzees

Paulien recalls an interview with biologist Jane Goodall that she saw last winter. In the interview the biologist was asked about her faith in relation to her scientific research. Goodall, who was raised as a Christian, developed her own sense of spirituality over the years, believing that all living things and the natural world are connected through a divine force. Paulien describes how Goodall answered that the theoretical, provable aspect of her biological research and the unprovable aspects of her belief combine very well. That the two in fact not only go well together but actually need each other. In one aspect of her life, as a biologist, Jane Goodall is concerned with formulating and finding explanations; in another, she has no words: the explanatory world reaches its limits. Paulien adds that after this, the researcher smiled somewhat shyly and fell silent.

Rita: “Can you tell me something about your own relation to faith?”

Paulien: “I felt a kind of jealousy when I first arrived in Lourdes. The fact that people can still surrender to a certain truth at a time when it’s quite difficult to distinguish what is true and what isn’t. That people can turn to God with their doubts or questions. I can also pray, but I don’t believe in the same way that I’ve

seen people believing in Lourdes. I think it would be comforting, and I don't have that comfort and it made me kind of jealous. I am familiar though with very coincidental experiences. For me, such experiences are mystical, not so much different from spiritual experiences.

"However, I do believe, or feel, that 'we don't know'. We just don't.] I like the idea of believing in all that I do not know. I don't believe there is nothing, meaning I don't believe that there is nothing outside of what we perceive.

"My time in Lourdes made it clear to me that there is a lot of good in believing on an individual level, not in imposed rules, but in finding the faith, the spirit of life, in oneself. I also read a book called *The Passion* according to G.H by Clarice Lispector, in which she expresses her experience with God in a very earthly manner, by staring at a cockroach in her own room. I think 'God' is a good word for 'something we don't know'. What else would you call it?"

(We come across a signpost. Among the signs referring to birds, chimpanzees, reptiles, toilets, there is a sign that says 'operating theatre'.)

Paulien: "Oh, can't we go there!?"

(We can't.)

At the sea lions

Paulien: "Lourdes was never modernized, which makes it all a bit clumsy, and therefore more attractive to me. The nun comes and rolls the trolley by herself, the microphone is manually turned on every time, and when it rains that microphone gets wet. There are many things you could quite easily fix in this day and age, but because they don't, it becomes extra beautiful to me. It delivers good scenes."

(We stare at the animals for a while, swimming, floating, gliding through the water. I remember the question people always asked in my childhood: 'Which animal would you like to be?' My answer, invariably: a sea lion.)

Paulien: "It's behaviour that you recognize. It's like that with many of the animals we have seen today. There are similarities; you can feel that you are part of the same world. You think: Oh, how nice it would be to be able to swim like that for a while."

(Moments later, she continues:)

"I also like that in observing people you don't know at all. I can relate to a woman hitting ivy with a stick [referring to one of her 'characters' in Lourdes TV], I feel like I can actually understand her."

Rita: "Do you have a criteria for why you film someone or not?"

Paulien: "I need to be able to kind of love these people. I think they have a certain charm, something very much their own. If I'm irritated by someone, they will not end up in my work."

(We stand with our backs towards the sea lion pool. Behind us we hear visitors uttering cries of wonder and endearment.)

Rita: "And those mystical experiences you spoke about?"

Paulien: "Sometimes I wonder, can you create your own miracles? I do believe you can influence things. Once I was working in Thessaloniki and I came across a park bench with the word 'capitalism' written on it in capital letters. Each time I passed it, I thought: 'Ah I could use this very well, because it combines with previous work'. However, the chance that people would pass there, or sit down, was pretty small. At a certain point, I wondered if I should create the moment, direct it, but it didn't work out. I asked two girls to take a seat, but they couldn't stop giggling, it all wasn't really usable. Then, the last morning before I left, I decided to return one last time, in the hope that something would happen. That morning, three elderly retired men used the bench, separately from each other, to do their morning exercises on it. It was super beautiful. These men were a bit stiff and then these exercises and the word 'capitalism', wonderful. Perhaps this wasn't really a mystical experience, but it was magical to me. It did feel as if I created the moment. But I've never heard God speak or anything, I have never seen the Virgin Mary."

Rita: "Would you want that to happen?"

Paulien: "Nah, I've had experience with someone who heard things, voices from a place of illness, so I don't need that so much."

It's the end of the afternoon. It has begun to rain harder. The drops are thick now, almost like wet snow. The zoom recorder gets wet and I think of the microphone and the clumsiness Paulien mentioned and

enjoyed in Lourdes. Two of my fingers have become white. It happens to me when my hands are cold and the blood circulation temporarily reduces, but it looks kind of scary, like they are dying. Paulien suggests showing me her new studio, which she recently moved to. This one appears to be around the corner from the zoo.

Rita: "I don't believe in randomness. I believe that you can be in the right place at the right time. I believe there is a coherence beyond my understanding that allows circumstances to occur that have a certain magic in them. Just as I believe that you can be someplace where nothing is going to happen (for you)."

Paulien: "Creativity, madness and faith are very close to each other, I think. Creating, making something non-existent existable, feeling with spheres, energies, ideas, feeling from within and not necessarily being able to interpret it, it's all part of a creative process."

Our conversation brings me back to the phenomenon of synchronicity. I read a little more about this concept introduced by the psychologist Carl G. Jung, who said: "For more than thirty years I have interested myself in this oracle technique or method of exploring the unconscious, for it has seemed to me of uncommon significance.... It relates to a certain curious principle that I have termed synchronicity, a concept that formulates a point of view diametrically opposed to that of causality. Since the latter is a merely statistical truth and not absolute, it is a sort of working hypothesis of how events evolve one out of another, whereas synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance."

I read that Jung regarded the subjective experience of synchronicity as a healthy and even necessary function of the human mind that can become harmful within psychosis.

"Synchronicity is an ever-present reality for those who have eyes to see." - Jung

We arrive at the studio and Paulien makes tea for us to warm up. She offers me a towel to dry my face and I take a look around. There are photographs on the wall with drawings of the same images next to them. They offer a look behind the scenes, behind the camera, a glimpse of why Paulien took the picture.

Rita: "Do you ever think 'If only I had my camera with me now'?"

Paulien: "In the beginning I thought that only what I record is valid and to be considered 'work'. Now I think differently about that. I take it in. When I look without my camera, it also becomes part of me; it will find its way into my work in a different way."

On the table there's a scale model of Centre Photographique Marseille and on her desk is a large computer screen. I imagine Paulien Oltheten sitting behind the rectangular portal, transporting her to the cave in France, day by day.

Paulien: "I want to walk to Lourdes one day, by my own route. I like the idea of ending up there."

It finally stops raining and we leave the studio. There's an opening of an exhibition Paulien wants to attend tonight. If nothing happens on her way, she will be able to make it just in time. As I watch her quickly cycle away, a door suddenly opens to my left. A man in orange jogging clothes appears in the doorway. He looks at me and asks, "Why are you here?"

I cannot find an answer to the question; instead, I nod at him and leave.

17/01/2022
from: paulienoltheten@protonmail.com
to: rita.hoofwijk@gmail.com

Hi Rita,

Today it is exactly one year since you were in my studio and I started to watch LourdesTV. That was on a Monday. And today of all days, Lourdes turned the scroll function off.

If there is such a thing as a God, cosmic energy or fate or just luck, or experience in forcing the right moments to happen, how beautiful and symbolic it is that, exactly one year later, I can no longer scroll back in time! It also feels really different, to all of a sudden no longer have control over time. To realize that from now on, I can only watch live. A beautiful ending for the film, I think. Just wanted to share this with you. Have a nice evening!

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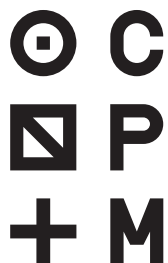
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