

Charles van Otterdijk
at Stroom Den Haag

AN INTANGIBLE THREAT

Never before has Stroom's exhibition space in The Hague felt so oppressive. Windows are taped shut, and some walls have suddenly been given a new wash of subdued grey. The rooms have consequently become a labyrinth. Strange oaken objects have been set up: a desk with a kind of receptacle attached to it, weird baseball bats that have a kink in them. Are these meant for operating machinery, or are they instruments of torture? Nowhere does this become clear. Highly stylized photographs hang on the walls at Stroom. In them you see, again, that desk and those peculiar bats. There's something extremely awkward about this: an intangible threat is lurking about here. That is of course precisely what the artist aims to achieve. As I look around he's still working on the sound installation. Odd noise is coming out of grey loudspeakers. It intensifies and then fades away again. Almost unnoticeably it takes hold of you. Around 2009 Charles van Otterdijk was wandering around in the woods in Germany, looking for peace and quiet, looking for people, too, who seek seclusion far from society. He had family living there and often stayed with them. It all reads like a boy's tale of adventure: there was a building surrounded by fences. Through a hole he crept inside and encountered those empty spaces with scant objects in them. He found papers that revealed codes, which he deciphered and which led to a second, equally secret location. There he found a USB stick that contained mysterious recordings of a typically dense Central European pine forest. He shows images of this. The audio file that he discovered on the USB stick is now playing in the space as a soundtrack of implicit intimidation. That hole in the fence, by the way, proved to be quickly mended when he returned the spot later. But never did he see anyone, and no one in the surroundings could or wanted to tell him anything.

Right in the heart of Europe, so coincidentally on that historically significant border between Poland and Germany: what might have taken place here? Although this made the artist paranoid, he decided to present his discovery (without revealing its location however) to Charles Esche of the Van Abbemuseum and Arno van Roosmalen, director of Stroom. Van Otterdijk will exhibit at both places. In The Hague the exhibition starts off the new, longer program *See You in The Hague*. This title is the taunting cry that Palestinians shout at Israeli soldiers. Because The Hague, it so happens, is the site of the International Court of Justice, where the Yugoslavia Tribunal was held. And Stroom, always willing to discern political influence, hereby examines the idea of a center for justice, which is how The Hague wishes to present itself.

RENDITION CENTERS

The chosen context evidently offers wide possibilities. *Double Centre* touches on a phenomenon which is broader than The Hague's ambitions for the city of Justice and Peace, the words that appear on its insignia nowadays. The installation raises questions as to how schemes are concocted by undemocratic means, perhaps with the involvement of governments or security forces, and are thereby totally unverifiable. How just can a government actually be, you wonder, as you look at all that clandestine stuff on the walls at Stroom. Van Otterdijk also photographed the known Rendition Centers, locations where alleged terrorists were held and tortured before being sent on to other locations. What took place in those buildings was already known. Those photographs have a more ordinary look than the mysterious small structures in Germany: not knowing seems to have driven the artist to great heights, as his own discoveries are more stirring and thereby more pressing. Visual art—the theatrical installation in combination with those somewhat polished photographs of spaces lacking any trace of wear and tear—outdoes actual documentation. With his rendered portrayal of a lone quest in the forest, Van Otterdijk gives rise to anxiety. Precisely enough, being just unsettling enough, to keep you from sleeping at night, to keep you thinking about the ways in which freedom and control can turn against you, about how vulnerable you are as an individual in the face of those unfathomable and hidden political forces. That makes it all the more courageous of him to allow nothing whatsoever to stand in the way of his evocation of those ominous places in the heart of Europe.

Machteld Leij

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