

2022 TEXT ON PRACTICE SIMON BECKS

Rats you say. That reminds me. I have a story about a rat too. I've never told you?

"A couple of years ago, in summertime, I saw a fat, grey rat underneath my staircase. Stained yellow teeth. Front left leg, broken. Crushed spine. Dead. Must have fallen off the spiral staircase I thought. But we all know that one rat is no rat. Rats come in groups. In mischiefs. For the next few days, I felt jittery. The unease of vermin. Intruders. Some days pass and I'm lying on my bed. Reading. When I suddenly sense a FLASH in my peripheral vision. I look up. Nothing. But as my eyes drift back to the page I see it. Fat. Grey. A rat. It stands still, right where I can see it. And it can see me. [Que Ennio Morricone Mexican Standoff music]. The fat, grey rat looked me square in the eye. Slowly, the quadruped stretched it back, moving its weight to its hind legs until it stood on just its two feet. He folded his now free arms behind its upright and cocked his head to one side. Without breaking eye contact the rat rummages behind his back, finds what it was looking for a slowly places a cigarette between its stained little teeth. The rat looks down for a second to light the little cigarette. Takes a long deep drag and blows out a big wash of smoke. PFFFFFFF. As the smoke starts to fade, it looks at me again and says 'Well. Well. Well. Simon. Let's talk.'

Within my practice, first, as an artist and curator and later as a director and writer, I pull intuitively from a varied world to produce enigmatic, ambitious and confrontational narratives. Characters that populate these worlds probe at the dark and often difficult topics of contemporary society. They are rarely judged by mere moral metrics but rather based on their intelligence, creativity or charisma. Over the years I fell in love with the idea that such fictional narratives offer me new avenues for exploring my own complex and tricky ideas.

The exploration of these ideas, however, are rarely fully formulated before writing starts. Research and writing happen simultaneously. The conception of work is conceptually linked to the 'exquisite corpse' game invented by the surrealists. Due to my meandering practice, I often work like a bricoleur, someone who pulls from all types of places to assemble new meaning out of existing phrases, images or ideas. Like Kenneth Goldsmith wrote in *Uncreative Writing*, a contemporary genius isn't stuck in an atelier-vacuum, but needs to know where knowledge is found so they can resemble that pre-existing knowledge to their liking into something new. This results in the generation of characters that act in unexpected and often more truthful ways and might blur the distinction between figuration and abstraction in storytelling.

This playful attitude towards material I see back in all the work I make. Precise yet careless. Characters often play complicated games, recite poems or have other elaborate ways of engaging with each other through play; an alternative structure to (their) reality. This type of *serious playing* is what I have been thinking about a lot. My hope is that my work dips in and out of serious, and into play. A state that I've been thinking of calling Calvinistic Absurdism.



Cave Play - ungraded footage (2022)

Cave Play is a short film that has currently been put on ice. Due to scheduling conflicts with the actors I've had to postpone the last days of shooting to the end of this year. We follow a woman who after discovering a hidden cave feels the irresistible urge to disappear into said cave. But can we disappear if no one is watching? Throughout the film, the protagonist and a middle-aged actress start getting to know each other at a glacial tempo. As two monoliths their conversations are grating and uncomfortable.

The film was inspired by a conversation I had with the conservator and curator of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Luc Amkreutz, of the prehistoric collection. We spoke about caves and the seemingly self-destructive urge of the prehistoric man to delve deep into the dark caves. Not offering more shelter or safety, the depths of the caves pose nothing more than danger. Yet the man and women of the time would wander kilometres through the pitch-black tunnels. What were they trying to find? What draw does the impenetrable darkness have? One answer might be that the acoustic and visual world of the cave (accompanied by a torch) mimics the qualities of a theatre of cinema. Shadows become larger than life and sounds reverberate through the halls. This might just be the place where *serious play* is invented.

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Intuition alone does not a good filmmaker make. For the last few years, I've been actively working on not only the artistic but also the craft of film-making. How do you direct actors with much more experience than you? How to navigate lens selection? Problems on set? Etc? Due to my love for wide-angle lenses, the entirety of the frame had to be considered in *Cave Play*. Entire rooms needed to be dressed and lit. This in combination with shooting on 35mm posed challenges concerning planning. Furthermore, by working with characters that are standoffish and stiff, in a camera set-up that is standoffish and stiff, it proved complicated to still get shots that we're able to tell a story and remained engaging enough to look at.

In my new work *The Crisisists* I set my attention to tackling some of the issues I found while shooting *Cave Play*. *The Crisisists* is a film about a young graphic design bookbinder that has become embroiled with a group led by a charismatic professor. The professor believes that simulated trauma might be good for the brain and encourages her following to generate such traumas. The relation between the bookbinder and the professor is slowly revealed, yet unravels at the same time.



The Crisisists (2021)

Here I worked with longer lenses and a tight aspect ratio. This made sure we became closer to the protagonist and were able to read of her how she felt. As opposed to the shorter lenses in *Cave Play*. The strict frame enabled me to let most sounds originate off-screen, which enhanced the focus on the character. She sees what we do not, and thus we cannot avoid but take a cue on how she is responding to the world, to get a sense of where we are, what their relations are and thus what to think. It helped relate to the characters.

Working with Belgian actors, who have a more soft, less staccato way of speaking, combined with a more naturalistic direction and environment, helped to tone down the intensity of the sometimes hard to follow scenes. The absurdity is now grounded in character work (specific people relating in specific ways) instead of simply idea's from the writer/director forced into a world.

In *The Crisisists* I further explore the possibilities of meta-fiction. Characters read books aloud, compose impromptu poems, explain theories at the dinner table or listen to lectures in an auditorium. The art of art in art is something that fascinates me and I intend to explore it even further. It creates a Droste effect of specific realities. And it offers in-

I feel that is a running theme in most of my work. The specific interests of specific people are often unbothered or uncensored with that which is expected or considered right. What insights, pleasures and different ways of seeing can be found in people that aren't as easily affected by societal expectations. They play games to make sense of their complex reality. Formulate their own ways of dealing with setbacks. Such as by disappearing or by pretending to be epileptic. They find joy in their own creative processes.

In the coming years, I intend to make much more. By doing so new patterns and modus operandi will appear. I'm looking forward to the new and unexpected relations the exquisite corpse type writing might bring up. I'm looking forward to standing in the middle of that forcefield between unbridled creativity and the understanding and translating processes that help the audience to be able to intuitively or intellectually relate to the film. My first challenge will be a film lab which I'll be attending in a couple of weeks hosted by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Described as a transcendental filmmaker, he focuses on merciless long, quiet takes that lull the viewer in a sense of trance. It is set in the Amazone, and I'll be left to my own devices. No large crew. Just a camera, a microphone and me. I sense this exercise might be very useful in tackling most questions I have at the moment. I also sense the tropical vermin i.e. spiders and snakes make my protestant heart beat faster than it should. We'll see if I happen upon tobacco smoking spiders that i can converse with in Peru. I'm looking forward to telling you all about it.

Text

Goldsmith, K (2011) *Uncreative Writing*
Pryor, F (2021) *Scenes from Prehistoric Life*
Huizinga, J (1938) *Homo Ludens*

References