

REPORT FROM HOLLAND

Out of the Woods

Two sculpture exhibitions in Dutch parks last summer translated their intellectual programs into compelling visual encounters.

BY JANET KOPLOS

Two outdoor sculpture exhibitions on view in Dutch parks from June through September provided interest for the eyes and provocation for the mind. Sonsbeek 2008, in Arnhem, raised questions of human aspiration, while *Lustwarande 08*, in Tilburg, focused on two current interests in sculpture: the grotesque and the ephemeral. Both shows were exceptionally audience-friendly, offering, in beautiful settings that combine forests and venerable landscaping traditions, engaging works that were not text-dependent. Both were broadly appealing without reduction to superficiality.

The Sonsbeek show was held in the hilly, approximately 160-acre, English-style Park Sonsbeek, where it has appeared irregularly since 1949. It is funded primarily by the city and regional governments, with an invited curator each time. In 1971, Wim Beeren (who later directed Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum) chose to make it a show

of contemporary, avant-garde work. The art so disconcerted the citizenry that the program wasn't resumed until 1986, when it was curated by Saskia Bos (now dean at Cooper Union in New York). Since then, its occurrence has been slightly more regular, with an American curator, Valerie Smith, in 1993 and the Belgian Jan Hoet in 2001.

For this year's 10th edition, the event's governors looked outside the ranks of curators and invited Anna Tilroe, widely known in Holland for her substantial essays on art and culture in the national newspapers, to organize the show. She chose the title and theme of "Grandeur," which she defines as "the painful but courageous" effort to transcend "day-to-day limitations." Among her innovations was the staging of a procession through the streets of Arnhem, with members of various "guilds" (ranging from surviving medieval guilds, now primarily social organizations, to

for-the-occasion groups as well as organizations such as the Red Cross) carrying the sculptures—in whole, in part or in representation—to the park five days in advance of the official opening by Queen Beatrix. Before the event, guild members met with the assigned artist whose work they would carry, participated in discussions and rehearsed several times. After this bonding experience, many groups maintained "their" sculpture in the park for the duration of the show.

The procession was a great success with the public, drawing an audience of 30,000. Tilroe also returned the festival completely to the park precincts. Beeren, Smith and Hoet all had let it expand into the city. That gesture, which would seem an effort to engage the citizenry, did not prove popular in any of those cases. Tilroe's show, probably spurred by the press coverage of the procession, drew 20,000 people to the park over the





All works this spread in "Sonsbeek 2008: Grandeur."

Opposite, Michel François: Appearance of a Tree, 2008.

Left, El Anatsui: Drying Towels, 2008.

Below, Fernando Sánchez Castillo: Spitting Leaders, 2008.

All Sonsbeek photos, unless otherwise noted, Herman van Ommen.



festival's first 10 days (that was the attendance for the entire three-month run in 1993).

Another surprise this year was an unorthodox catalogue, edited by critic and novelist Cornel Biereus at Tilroe's invitation. To this book, Tilroe contributed only a brief essay, but the whole project was based on her curatorial notion that the 26 artists or duos constituted an alphabet. She assigned each of them a letter and designated a concept or reference—a gamut of, shall we say, life values, such as contemplation, resilience, language, exal-

tation or dynamics. In doing so, Tilroe was extending a challenge she has long presented to the Dutch art world: to relate art to life and make it a part of the debate in the contemporary world. This ambitious agenda was spelled out only in the catalogue. The artists were presented in this alphabetical order, each accompanied by a group of images selected by Biereus that included pictures of the artist's work but added historical, political, literary and other contemporary art images, as he wished, along with 26 mini-essays by Wouter Hillaert that

elaborated on Tilroe's categories in directions both poetic and political. "A" was assigned to Dutch artist Marijke van Warmerdam, who showed a video of an elephant's observing eye—represented by a real elephant in the procession—and Hillaert's accompanying essay addressed "Memory." The "Z" was French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel, who showed an enormous jewel-like chandelier, which was carried in the procession and then suspended high between four trees in the park's woods: the essay addressed "Crowning."

**Art and culture critic
Anna Tilroe chose
“grandeur” as the theme
for Sonsbeek 2008, tying
projects by the event’s
26 artists and duos
to various life
values or aspirations.**

This extrapolation might seem a worst-case instance of artworks serving merely as the illustrations of a curator’s theme, except that the connections were made obliquely and were not part of viewers’ direct encounter with the work. Better, perhaps, to regard this book, which provides little direct information on the artists or their works, as an independent, parallel creative act of rumination on themes that the artworks may suggest. The small, inexpensive guidebook carried by park visitors, on the other hand, includes each artist’s birth date, birth place and residence, along with a nutshell work history and a description of the Sonsbeek piece, so it is closer to a conventional catalogue, though without an essay. The guidebook presents the artists in Tilroe’s A to Z order, but their works were sited with the best presentation in mind, and park visitors could experience them in any order. Allusions to the categories in the brief guidebook descriptions would probably be caught only by someone who had already read the catalogue.

The catalogue did not please all artists or observers. Yet—given the seriousness, complexity and even nobility of Tilroe’s assertion that despite these troubled times of ecological and political threats, cynicism should not rule—the book is worth reading for its reminders of all that art may lead one to ponder.

The works in the park were satisfying in themselves. There was not one out-and-out failure in the show; pieces were variously striking, memorable or touching. Michel François (Belgium) poised an uprooted mature tree with a 20-ton, burlap-wrapped root ball in an unnatural horizontal position upon a thick post on the top of a hill. Nearby were a cut stump, a fallen log and a braced sapling—a natural history in brief. The displaced tree had to be tended and watered, and it changed over time, in response to gravity and light. (The designated concept was “Balance.”) Tomas Saraceno (Argentina/Germany), installed in a shady glen one of the enormous bubble structures (clusters of transparent, helium-filled balloons) for which he is known. “Destination” was implied by the thought that it might be an ideal or transporting environment. Rini Hurkmans (Netherlands) was represented by a *Flag of Compassion* that she designed and constructed a few years ago to carry in an anti-war protest. A wide, wavy band of sun yellow on a





All works this spread in "Sonsbeek 2008: Grandeur."

Clockwise from top:
Lara Schnitger: *Miss Universe*, 2008.

Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger: *The Mystery of Fertility*, 2008.

Tomas Saraceno: *Flying Green House*, 2008.
Photo Janet Koplos.

white field, it flew on a flagpole at the boundary between forest and city, and was for sale in two sizes in the festival shop. The category was "Compassion," seemingly predetermined by the artist in this case. Hurlmans also assembled an accompanying 26-by-13-foot "shroud" of white shirts and blouses of all types and sizes, many of them women's and children's, representing innocent victims of war. On the other hand, the comical *Spitting Leaders* by Fernando Sánchez Castillo (Spain)—several plumed bronze heads of recognizable great men from history, set in a pond and periodically splatting each other—seems to have been designated by Tilroe ironically, with "Admiration." (The Guild of Lawyers carried the work in the procession.)

Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger (Switzerland), collaborators since 1997, set a blue toolshed into a walled flower garden within the park, started a salt-crystal growth (died garish pink) inside it, pierced the walls with a bizarre assortment of garden tools, and planted a few shrubs and vines among them. The theme, easily, was "Growth." A work by Rona Pondick (U.S.) was a small, leafless, silvery metal tree with one strange fruit in the midst of the branches: the artist's hairless, stainless-steel head. The piece, sited in a pond, appeared to float, its twisting roots visible. For the curator it represented "Wisdom."

Brody Condon (U.S.) orchestrated performances and provided a 40-foot tower of scaffolding, wood and fabric as the setting for "larpers" (live acting role players) to use twice a week during the run of the show. Derived from computer games, their activities were unscripted but confined to agreed-upon conditions. Condon's organizational efforts gave visitors an opportunity to see this playing in person, and for Tilroe it exemplified "Imagination." Life-size symbolic figures were constructed by Joseph Sumégné of industrial discards and fragments representing dignified yet uncanny elders in his native Cameroon ("Organization"). Lara Schnitger (Netherlands/U.S.) showed a cloth-over-armature female figure that was tall enough for visitors to walk under, and which included a lamp at heart level ("Vitality"). Titled *Miss Universe*, it had one arm that was covered with fabric depicting lesbian lovers and was ornamented with dangling hearts.

Schnitger's work was also seen outside the park at the Museum of Modern Art in Arnhem. A piece titled *Private Dancer* was featured in a two-person show called "Cross Over," one of two exhibitions the museum organized in conjunction with the Sonsbeek festival. This work consisted of burgundy fabric stretched over angular wood framing to make a large female figure with all limbs akimbo. She was fancied up with lacy garters, into which American currency was tucked. Yasue Maetake's wonderful three-screen video in the museum, with its droll depictions of the artist engaged in Sisyphean labors (she applies paint to the blossoms on a cherry tree, sews a line into the sand at the ocean's edge, saws at a rock with a wire, tries to dust a field) surpasses in impact her assembly of bones and mirrors in Park Sonsbeek.

The rest of the museum was taken up with an exhibition about art processions called "Carried Away," a response to Tilroe's concept that was guest-curated by Nanda Janssen, who contributed an essay on the same subject to Bierens's book. The show also included some Sonsbeek artists, such as the Berlin-based British artist Stephen Wilks. Here he showed enormous cloth pig sculptures (one served as beanbag-type seating for viewing a video) inspired by Orwell's *Animal Farm*; works from his "Trojan Donkey" series were on view at Sonsbeek, the

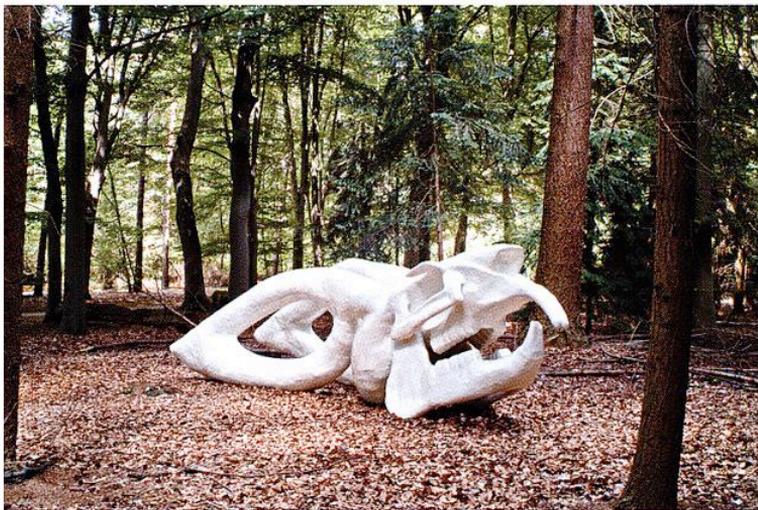
The works in “Wanderland”—most made for the show—were sited to play off the natural and unnatural particularities of De Oude Warande (The Old Pleasure-Garden), an 18th-century park.

cloth animals supported by wooden stick-figure humans on a turntable. The museum show examined—through objects, photographs, films and installations—art processions in a variety of places from the early 20th century to present times, including the parading of Tatlin’s model for the *Monument for the Third International* (1920) and the procession from MOMA’s Manhattan location to its temporary site in Queens organized in 2002 by Francis Alÿs. Less famous but lively and interesting instances include Meschac Gaba’s Paris and London “Tresses Parade” featuring his architectural wigs, James Lee Byars’s *Mile Long Garment*, Lucy Orta’s *Nexus Architecture* (people in costumes connected with tubes), Endre Tóth’s *Zero Demonstration* (individuals carrying placards with multiple zeroes) and other events by Tinguely, Brus, Picabia, Satie, Beuys and several Dutch artists. It was a small show with broad implications (like Bieren’s book), and thoroughly entertaining.

The second outdoor sculpture show to open in Holland this year was *Lustwarande 08*, titled “Wanderland.” It is the third such exhibition organized by the Fundament Foundation of Tilburg and was curated by Fundament’s Chris Driessen in a park only slightly smaller than Sonsbeek but much more geometric in design. This year the show included works by 25 artists, 16 of whom were 40 or under.

The works—most of them made for the show—and their placement played off the particularities of De Oude Warande (The Old Pleasure-Garden). It was laid out in 1712 by a German prince, who then ruled Tilburg, as a “star pattern” (paths define subdivided and rotated squares as well as a circle, a diamond and an octagon). In addition to addressing Driessen’s themes of the grotesque and the ephemeral (which works fit those categories was usually self-evident), some pieces responded to the natural and unnatural qualities of the place.

Set at the center point of the complex configuration was Subodh Gupta’s *Alpha Lyrae*, a monumental egg shape composed of chromed pots, pans, spoons, bowls and other domestic paraphernalia. The similarly constructed skull that Gupta showed outside Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 2007 might have qualified as grotesque; this work evaded the



question, for it served as a glittering beacon, visible down the long corridors of the densely wooded park, to help visitors find their way.

Other works could be called “grotesque” for one reason or another. The British sculptor Laura Ford tucked three separate bronze animal figures into the underbrush. These were characters from Beatrix Potter’s children’s stories, dressed in rags and carrying bags or blankets as if they were homeless people. It’s an anthropomorphic rendering of today’s displaced and threatened fauna. A similar message may be derived from the pathetic bandaged monkey standing in elephant-feet boots, which Michael Nitsche (Germany) made of repellent resins; it

All works this spread in “Lustwarande 08: Wanderland.”

*Clockwise from top left:
Jens Pfeifer: Super Giant Rabbit Skull,
2008, polyester and paint.*

*Gereon Krebber: Deemed, 2008,
latex and foil. Photo Janet Koplos.*

Vincent Olinet: Not Yet My Story, 2008.

Paul McCarthy: Bronze Blockhead, 2000, 10 feet high.

*Michael Nitsche: No Sleep ‘til Ragnarök,
2008, 5 feet high. Photo Janet Koplos.*

Photos this spread, unless otherwise noted, Dirk Pauwels, courtesy Fundament Foundation, Tilburg.



looks more like a Paul McCarthy work than the American artist's own contribution, a large sculpture of piled figurative elements—elf, foot, gloved hands—that is toned down by the propriety of bronze. There were also distorted or composite figures by David Bade, Bart van Dijk, Caroline Coolen, Jonathan Meese and Jon Pylp-chuk. A different sort of grotesque effect was offered by two German artists, Jens Pfeifer with his *Super Giant Rabbit Skull*, which lay in the woods like a crashed rocket ship, and Gereon Krebber with *Deemed*, a ghostly thing rising from a sludgy pond like a cartoon miasma.

Krebber's pond sculpture might also fall under the curator's other thematic heading, the ephemeral, because it was actually a balloon wrapped in tape. A few works touched so lightly on the landscape of De Oude Warande that it was surprising to find them in an event like this where their delicacy was exposed and unprotected. One was *Forest People* by Ham Jin (Korea)—minuscule creatures made of gobs of soil or peanut shells, some linked by long, fine ladders, seemingly living comfortably in a single pine tree. The Dutch artist André Pielage applied white paint to dead under-branches at a certain height in a grove of pines, yielding an almost invisible work that was discernible only as a barely present plane parallel to the earth in that shadowy space.

Among the artists who responded to the geometric organization of the park was Miroslaw Balka (Poland), who constructed a metal passageway that extended the terminus of one path with a politically symbolic right turn and dead end. Renato Nicolodi (Belgium) apparently saw the park geometry as oppressive. He constructed a kind of bunker with an implied (unenterable) underground cell and a terrace that bleakly faced an embankment; he titled it *Oblivio I*. Vincent Olinet (France/Belgium), on the other hand, set a four-poster bed with gauzy hangings, seemingly straight out of Cinderella's castle at Disneyland, afloat amid the lily pads of a pond. It looked magical at the opening of the exhibition, but one could only imagine how perfection would fade with weeks in the weather, to say nothing of visiting birds and other creatures.

This year's Sonsbeek and Lustwarande, kept to a reasonable scale that allowed pleasant meandering and with works that were interesting in themselves, without explanation, could serve as models for public sculpture exhibitions. Both curators, Tilroe and Driessen, seem willing to let art speak visually, in its elliptical language, and let viewers take it from there. □

"Sonsbeek 2008: Grandeur," curated by Anna Tilroe, was on view June 13-Sept. 21 at Park Sonsbeek, Arnhem. *"Carried Away: Procession in Art,"* curated by Nanda Janssen, and *"Cross Over,"* curated by Mirjam Westen, ran concurrently at the Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem. *"Lustwarande 08: Wanderland,"* curated by Chris Driessen, was on view June 28-Sept. 28 at Park de Oude Warande, Tilburg.