

If the Universe Were Watching

Ilke Gers interviewed by Hilde de Bruijn (Artistic Director of Into Nature) on the occasion of *Into Nature: Time Horizons*, the 4th edition of Into Nature's outdoor biennial, 29 July – 29 October 2023

HdB In your work you explore the relationship between the body, movement and language. This often results in large-scale, two-dimensional installations with chalk lines or tape, which you apply to floors of exhibition spaces or in public spaces. Visitors can move around as well as through these installations, which invites them to relate playfully to the architecture. The invitation by ASTRON (the Netherlands Institute for Radio Astronomy) to create a message to the universe on top of some of the covers of the antenna units of the world's largest radio telescope created a range of challenges for you. What was the biggest challenge and could you say a little more as to how you have dealt with it?

IG In making installations that you are invited to enter, walk through, and touch, I am interested in audiences being physically implicated in the work. This creates a direct relation to the work, and many positions from which to view it, which can be determined by the audience themselves.

In this work I got the opportunity to extend this to a position not available or physically reachable by an audience – through the starting point of a message that expands into the universe. What is exciting about this for me is that it has more to do with imagination, as you are invited to take a position as viewer from above looking back at earth.

The biggest challenge in making this work was also the part that was most exciting, the location that allowed for audiences to take this vantage point. Like most telescopes, LOFAR (Low Frequency Array) is located inside a nature reserve to avoid human interference with measuring instruments. It's the most beautiful location I've worked in, with wildlife all around. Because bird breeding season starts in the middle of March—and the public is not allowed to enter the area once it begins—we had to install during winter, in constantly changing weather conditions. This unpredictable environment, fairly inhospitable to humans in winter, tested the materials and processes we developed to install the work.

We had to respond and adjust to the shifting conditions, and find solutions to things like moisture coming from not only above, but also below the antenna units. Because I got to work with a really great, dedicated team from Into Nature, with support from ASTRON, who are experienced in maintaining the telescope in this environment, we managed to install and document the work despite severe weather that included snow, hail and high winds. Working with open processes like this means the environment plays a role in the final form of the work. Nature not only shaped its limits, but also determined the materials, the way we installed it and therefore the message that was eventually inscribed on the telescope, and so also became part of the work.

HdB With the exhibition Time Horizons, Into Nature wanted to use the imagination, the use of metaphors and the sensory experiences that the visual arts offer us to expand and multiply our time horizons. In preparation for this work you spent a week with ASTRON scientists. Did you talk with them about time as well? What do you think about this work in relation to time?

During the week I spent at ASTRON I wanted to learn as much as I could about the telescope, astronomy, radio waves, equipment, history, the site and the motivations and attitudes behind this research. Time, of course, underpins everything ASTRON does, as we are always looking back at history when we look up to the sky. For instance, what we see has to travel through light waves that take years to reach our view. One of the purposes of the LOFAR telescope is to find out why the universe, which was chaotic following the Big Bang, started to take some order after a period of time, called the Epoch of Reionization. Radio waves detect hydrogen signals from this reionisation, which might give a clue as to why this happened a few hundred million years ago.

This timescale is almost unimaginable, yet relevant to how we think about the universe and the world we inhabit. What had an effect on me was thinking about these immense scales that don't have practical tools or models for imagining within our everyday lives. This is reflected in something as simple as the distance between Earth and the Moon not being represented accurately most of the time, because it doesn't fit on a sheet of paper or in a book we can hold in our hands. Shortening this space in models to be able to show Earth and the Moon together in one image means that we don't get a sense of the actual distances and spaces beyond earth, resulting in the fact that we imagine this space, and everything beyond, as much closer to, and centred around us.

While at ASTRON, I was thinking about finding ways in which to play with and disrupt how space, and particularly time is represented in these limited, fixed, or linear ways. I realised that the core of the telescope I would be working with—an almost perfect circular island with twelve units inside it—could be seen as a

clock face that has the digits shaken up and moved from their fixed positions. While it's not important to be able to 'read' a possible message I would make on the telescope, viewing the Superterp and antenna units inside it from above as a shaken-up clock face could suggest the idea of 'telling time', in a sense that you look at a clock face to read what time it is. But which, in this case, disrupts the way we present time as flowing and continuous. I also liked that 'telling time' could refer to 'story telling time', suggesting that there is something to read into or tell from the message, and how 'telling time' could also be a shortened version of 'time is telling'. In other words, time is telling us something here. While there is a seriousness to the work and research undertaken around how this message was composed, I wanted it to also have a playful aspect where the viewer is invited to look longer without needing a clear answer.

HdB How do you perceive the relation between the physical installation on top of the antenna units, which existed for only about six days, and was always meant to be experienced through images, and the role photography came to play in this work? Would you agree if I would say that photography, normally only used by you to document your installations, could in the case of this particular work be considered the main artistic medium you've worked in?

IG Because the telescope would not be accessible to visitors, it was clear from the beginning that this work will only ever be visible through a mediating layer – drone photos, as well as satellite photos that could be viewed on Google Maps, for instance. While photography is always important in documenting installations that are often temporary, the use of photography as the primary way to experience the work

is a new approach for me. Because photography works with light traveling through a lens, it makes sense with a project related to a telescope that captures information from the past in order to be interpreted, but I also wanted to keep the work somehow alive, or at least active, even though it would not physically exist on the telescope during the time of the exhibition.

The photos were used to make an interface that works in the same way as Google Maps to show visitors' location in relation to the Superterp with the message on it. The thinking behind this was to give an indication of the scale of the work and an overall context of the area in a format we are all used to on our phones. I also made postcards from the drone photos, with the intention that this medium for writing a message—to be sent to somebody else—can activate the idea of a message sent to the universe, which can in turn circulate in a different way. The systems by which information and materials circulate and are distributed is something I often explore through publishing projects, and through this work I got the opportunity to bring together installation and publishing in a very simple form.

HdB In preparation of this work you also led a workshop with children between the age of 8 and 14 years. They were asked what message they would send to the universe. What do you think was most striking about this experience? Is there any aspect about the workshop that eventually influenced the work that you made?

IG The children had little resistance to such an open question, and gave a full range of imaginative answers without being concerned about getting it wrong. This became more evident when we started responding to

the question by making markings on the ground with tape. The limitations defined by the material and space made it a more open and collaborative exercise, with markings overlapping the others around them which, along with using our full bodies to make forms on the ground, felt freer than using language on individual and separate pieces of paper.

I was most impressed by the thoughtfulness of some of the responses, which took the form of questions to define possible answers in a better way. The workshop reinforced the idea that it is ok to ask questions and give suggestions for answers rather than one all-encompassing answer.

HdB Sending a message to the universe brings up quite a few questions. We've talked for instance about the fact that if the universe were indeed listening, it would be a great responsibility, and that it may be presumptuous of one person to send a message that could be perceived as a message from humankind in general. We discussed that you speak from a position of power, or privilege so to say. Has creating an abstract message that resembles many signs, symbols and letters from many cultures but that doesn't add up to a readable message been your solution for that?

IG Working on this project is a privilege not only because of what it represents in terms of 'sending a message to the universe', but also because I have been privy to so much information and support, and so many tools in the process. The way I work involves trying to absorb as much information about the context as possible, and then thinking about formal ways in which the information gathered could be relayed. I had the opportunity to ask all the questions I could think of, and get a sense of the space, the conditions, the history of the telescope,

and everything around it. What I enjoyed most were the informal conversations in which people talked about their own motivation for the work they do, and in this way I got a sense of what really underlies the things we make and build. I spoke with astronomers about their personal thoughts on the universe, for instance, as well as the grounds people, who maintain the telescope, about their ideas on life and death. Somehow, reflecting on what is beyond Earth quickly opens up space for conversations that reveal a lot about people's internal lives.

There are many ways of thinking about the question of my responsibilities when it comes to sending what could be seen as a collective message. While I'm commissioned to do this project, and am responsible for the outcome of the work, it is very much a collective endeavour. Not only am I working with, talking with, and learning from many other people to develop it, I am also using tools, processes and materials that have been developed by many people around me. One of the key tools I use is language, and that is something that's been handed down to me, that I get to consider, explore and play with in my work.

The reframing of language forms is a skill that I bring to the project. Like a lot of solid things humans made around us, language is one of the things we take for granted as being fixed and unchangeable, and through working with and destabilising these forms, sometimes through referring back to where they come from, I hope to suggest a potential for how language could perhaps take on shapes that better serve the people who use it every day.

In this project, I was interested in referencing the development of language, in particular the way the Latin alphabet developed from pictographic forms (which, more like drawings, depict what they refer

to) into a phonetic alphabet of abstracted forms. Early scripts that lead to the alphabet, such as Syriac and pre-Egyptian pictographs, were made up of pictures of animals and nature. What we now read as an 'A' comes from the aleph, originally a bull's head, 'Q' is from the letter quoth, the Hebrew term for monkey – tail intact, and 'M' comes from Mem, meaning water, drawn as a series of waves. Our current-day letters don't carry the meaning they once did, but persist as a kind of hidden play of the natural world they originated from. In this way, a latent reference to nature still flickers behind our complex language for abstract ideas. For me, this work—installed in nature, and at the same time on a telescope that can be seen as representing some of the most advanced technological expertise we have—is an interesting space to reflect on this linguistic estrangement from nature, and more so the potential of realigning with the natural environment.

I think that any 'message to the universe' that is didactic would limit the possibility for imagining something else. In times of environmental degradation and climate crisis it's tempting to send a clear environmental message, but I don't know whether that would be a successful way of dealing with the imaginative scope of the context. In saying that, there is nothing saying that the message is not an outcry for help, accentuated by an exclamation mark, or perhaps a message to say, finally, that we are here...

☞ *If the Universe Were Watching* is an installation by Ilke Gers at the centre of the world's largest low frequency telescope, LOFAR (Low-Frequency Array). Distributed through the Netherlands and Europe, the centre of the telescope, referred to as the core or Superterp, is located on a circular island (or 'terp' in Dutch), situated between Exloo and Buinen in Drenthe, the Netherlands. The core covers a total area of 250 x 250m, containing 12 antenna units of 30 x 30m. Each unit is made up of 5 x 5m squares, covered in polystyrene and wrapped in tarpaulin to protect the measuring instruments. The installation, made of vinyl, is placed on top of the tarpaulin covering the telescope. Each of the twelve antenna units in the Superterp has its own vinyl markings, which together make up an image that can be read from above.