

English 

DAAN ROOSEGAARDE PRESENCE



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GRONINGER MUSEUM

Hidden Capital

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They look like jellyfish, transparent luminescent organisms from the deep sea. They lie still on the ground, only visible because the floor emits a mysterious light. Until they are touched and the room suddenly comes to life: the jellyfish start to move, leaving behind a luminous trail. The floor, previously like an empty canvas, suddenly displays a tangle of whimsical, green luminescent lines. Some look like children's scribbles, or maybe rock carvings or surrealistic automatic drawings. It's a weird and wonderful as well as enchanting spectacle. Also, it is work that, without any additional explanation, encourages people to touch, push, roll, draw and write. It may even lead to joint experiments – and that is exactly what it is supposed to do.

The luminous spheres, also known as *Lolas*, are part of *Presence*, a new interactive work of art that innovator and artist Daan Roosegaarde developed especially for the Groninger Museum. Covering an entire floor, the installation, its form and colour changing continually due to interaction with visitors, is like a landscape full of ever-new and unexpected possibilities. The emphasis on physical interaction with the work is deliberate. Its potential role as a powerful agent of change may well be the heart of this installation. 'I wanted to create a place where you feel connected,' says Roosegaarde, 'You make the work and the work makes you.' Visitors actively (co)design the installation, but their activity also affects them. The visible impact all visitors have on this environment makes them hyperaware of their own presence. *Presence's* extraordinariness lies in this reciprocity, in the way interaction with the installation affects visitors' cognition, the way they acquire knowledge, and creates new preconditions that make alternatives conceivable.

This means *Presence* is also an inquiry and an experiment into forms of display in which not only sight, but also immersion, touch and movement play an important part. Actively participating visitors break down role patterns and overcome traditional contrasts such as spectator-work of art, thinking-acting and body-mind. Roosegaarde radicalizes this by including visitors in his work as 'moving parts'. Typically, his hybrid work cannot be described by clear-cut definitions. This dovetails

with the policy of the Groninger Museum to focus on artists who investigate and redefine the boundaries of their own discipline.

NO ORDINARY EXHIBITION

It was several years ago that Daan Roosegaarde was first approached to make an exhibition especially for the Groninger Museum. The idea of a traditionally set-up exhibition with rows of works on pedestals, models in hermetically sealed showcases and neat series of photographs on the walls made him shudder. 'Lord, no, not that!' No ordinary exhibition therefore, but the answer to the question of what kind of exhibition it would be turned out to be quite a challenging one – a challenge that Roosegaarde fully accepted. Perhaps the most complicated element was the change of mindset this artist, who previously mainly displayed his work in the external public space, needed to make to be able to create a work of art that would derive its strength from the conditions within four museum walls. It was, after all, quite an unusual step for an artist whose work has always been so very connected to the landscape in general and the Dutch landscape in particular.

LANDSCAPE OF THE FUTURE

Pioneering the landscape of the future, Roosegaarde's work investigates the dual meaning of the Dutch homonym *schoonheid*, which means both 'beauty' and 'cleanliness' and is reflected by new social values such as clean air, clean water and clean energy. His installations manage to make the complex problems created by the part people play in the world and the effects thereof visible and perceptible in a captivating and often wonderful way. He knows that rather than by crunching numbers and drawing up statistics, he can raise people's awareness by immersing them in visualizations and stories that touch them emotionally and make them realize how precious and vulnerable the earth and therefore they themselves are.

This awareness of not being separate from the world, from nature, can likely be traced back to Roosegaarde's early life. He remembers that as a child he was always outdoors, in nature, always close to the water. There were treehouses, he drove trolleys off slopes, probably talking

twenty to the dozen, all of his senses alive. Looking back, this is also what later made him aware that nature in the Netherlands is anything but natural. It's rather a miracle of hydraulic engineering. There is a well-known saying: 'God created the earth, but the Dutch created Holland.' In a single sentence, this sums up the ingenuity of the Dutch, their belief in social engineering and their fight against the water.

Another important artistic influence was the land and environmental art of the 1960s and 1970s, for example that of Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson. The latter is well-known in the Netherlands for his *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill*, which was built in Emmen on the occasion of the *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* exhibition in 1971. Land art emphasizes both the beauty and the vulnerability of the environment and transforms spectators into participants who, as they roam the landscape, continue to discover the work and the environment from changing points of view.

These are starting points that are characteristic of Roosegaarde's work as well. Some earlier works are functional and useful, like *Smog Free Tower* (2015), which purifies polluted air, or *Windvogel* (2017), which generates green energy and is based on an idea of the first Dutch astronaut Wubbo Ockels, who was born in Groningen. More often, his interventions turn the apparently ordinary into something that provides an extraordinary experience and unveils things that would have otherwise been overlooked. His interactive installation *Dune* (2006-2012), consisting of a landscape of artificial stalks tipped with LEDs, responded to the touches, movements and sounds of passers-by. Arranged in a bicycle tunnel, they turned its gloomy atmosphere into a friendly and inviting environment. Roosegaarde also created the *Van Gogh Path* (2012-2015) in Nuenen near Eindhoven, once the residence of this famous painter, in collaboration with construction company Heijmans. Unremarkable by day, at night thousands of green and blue pebbles light up to recreate the pattern of the sky in *The Starry Night*, one of Van Gogh's most famous paintings. This not only lights the path extraordinarily well, but also transforms cycling in the dark – something quite mundane in the Netherlands – into a fairy-tale, aesthetic sensation.

Inspired by the famous eighteenth-century windmills of Kinderdijk that once drained the excess water from the polders, Roosegaarde created *Windlicht* (2016) for a wind farm in the Province of Zeeland. Many Dutch people do not consider today's windmills an asset to the landscape, but to Roosegaarde they embody what Kinderdijk once represented: a paragon of innovation. Connecting the rotating windmill blades with light, he created a play of dancing lines that emphasized the beauty of this technical ingenuity and the landscape as well as the value of green energy. For *Waterlicht* (2016-2018), another temporary work of light art that was shown at various locations in the Netherlands and abroad, he used a play of blue, undulating light to indicate how high the water would rise in the absence of dikes and other waterworks. This virtual flood connected Dutch history and the water to the topicality and urgency of the rising sea level and made them mesmerizingly and enchantingly tangible.

BACK INSIDE

Roosegaarde's oeuvre includes a lot of installations that he made especially for public space, most of them site-specific, monumental works that use natural elements such as air, water, light and wind. The proposition to create a large, museum-specific work did not strike him as self-evident; after all, it is hard to show these elements to their full advantage in an interior. It took a radical change of mindset, a process Roosegaarde felt was not unlike learning a new language.

As the starting points for the exhibition, Roosegaarde took the iconic ecological footprint and the idea of visualizing the human impact on their environment. During the creative process, he and his team came up with some quite surprising proposals. Every shot certainly did not go home – 'The first pancake is never perfect,' as he said. Various plans, experiments and prototypes came and went, resulting eventually in *Presence*, his first major solo project for a museum.

The structure of *Presence* allows visitors to follow a route through different atmospheres. The atmospheres deliberately use a minimum of visual means: light, dark, big, small, hard, soft, square and round. It is

a visual language characteristic of Roosegaarde, one that is also found elsewhere in his geometrically abstract and minimalistic work.

The most visually striking aspect of *Presence* is probably the specific way in which light and light-sensitive elements are used to make visitors feel as if they are walking through a dream landscape. Some individual atmospheres call up strong associations with famous works of art. The grid pattern with massive rectangular blocks in the first room is inspired by paintings by Mondrian and the austere layout of the Dutch landscape. Blue light appears to be scanning the space and the visitors continuously, like a copier. Whenever the light is blocked, it leaves prints or traces on the light-sensitive floor. Another space contains spherical objects and behaves like a kind of freestyle planetarium in which visitors can build their own solar system. Gradually, the objects around them become smaller, looser and more malleable, until they find themselves in a kind of universe made of luminous stardust extending before them like a pointillist panorama. Also striking are the so-called *Lolas*, little jellyfish, transparent spheres that, like some kind of intriguing organisms, draw phosphorescent lines reminiscent of cave drawings, graffiti or perhaps the secret writing of artist Cy Twombly. The room that visitors may well experience as the most demanding is completely empty, like a white cube. Loosely inspired by the minimalism of light artist James Turrell, this work comprises nothing but the visitors and the room, with the room taking pictures of the visitors rather than the other way around.

ACTION!

Presence ensures constant perspectival changes. Visitors first feel like giants in one room, then like ants in the next. Some elements are solid and immovable, while others do not seem to have a fixed place or shape. Visitors get to play different roles – of course they can simply look and let things happen, but *Presence* is above all an invitation to break with the role of the civilized museum visitor and enter into a different relationship with the work by intervening. Visitors change from spectators into makers and from makers into parts of the installation that are subsequently looked at by other visitors.

It's likely that the wondrous materiality of the objects – sometimes big and round and hard and solid or, contrastingly, very small and soft – automatically encourages spontaneous action. Who wouldn't, automatically, reach out to the stardust or give the *Lolas* a little push? *Presence* offers visitors all kinds of opportunities to make their presence at the exhibition felt. Without interaction, the work is unfinished, incomplete. This invitation extended to visitors – to go their own way and complete the work with their own input, unhindered by any rules – confronts people with their physical possibilities and limitations as well as with their own attitude. Who stands around watching and who joins in? Who likes to make a difference and who'd rather not? Who is impulsive and takes the plunge and who starts by making a plan? Who is creative and who is reflective? Who likes to be in control and who is reactive? Who works alone and who works with others? Who likes to act for the sake of acting and who likes to have something to show for it? Who feels responsible for keeping the work intact?

With visitors as its most important variables, the exhibition is in constant flux and therefore never the same. In this way *Presence* connects visitors with the work and with themselves. They physically, symbolically experience what the exhibition is about: the impact of people on the world and the part they play. As Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan says, in Roosegaarde's favourite quote: 'There are no passengers on spaceship earth. We are all crew.'

TOUCH? PLEASE DO!

This also means that visitors can touch and move almost everything in the exhibition. By introducing this tactile element Roosegaarde both eliminates an annoying condition and breaks with a deeply ingrained norm in the museum world, one represented by the many signs saying: 'Please do not touch. Thank you.' The art in museums, after all, is usually only meant to be looked at. Although the work itself (often) consists of matter, for example as a painting or an object, the imagination, feelings and appreciation it fires are all intangible and immaterial. One simply does not experience art with one's back, feet or behind, but with one's head . . . or does one? From

this point of view, having a body is not a prerequisite for the appreciation of art. A pair of eyes and a brain, that's all it takes!

Presence also meant the museum had to readjust. Like many other museums, the Groninger Museum is a little scared of bodies. A lot of art is fragile and precious and touching hands, piercing fingers, bodies stumbling backwards or even falling are a risk. All tools to keep visitors at a safe distance physically – pedestals, strings, fences, glass covers, invisible security systems with sensors and lines on the floor – were removed for *Presence*.

GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD

This emphasis on the intellectual process seems quite logical. After all, art is thought to be about imagination, conception, in other words, about thoughts. People may experience art as heart-stopping, but it's mainly a matter of the mind. This is so obvious that it seems crazy to mention it at all. Art's preference for the intellectual is not unique. It is not without reason that people study the humanities and that publications on philosophy of mind far outnumber those about the philosophy of the body. This also manifests in daily life, where working with one's head is valued over working with one's hands.

This is a hierarchical distinction that can be traced back to Plato and his *Theory of Ideas*, which purports that the material world is a kind of copy of the world of unchangeable ideas that can only be accessed by the mind. This dualism was made widely known by seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes, who emphasized it with his famous words 'I think, therefore I am'. He declared that he doubted everything, including the existence of his body, except for doubt itself. He saw thinking as primary and as independent of the body and the rest of the world. Although these ideas have been criticized and refuted in many ways, Descartes' influence on (Western) thinking is hard to overestimate. Body and mind, object and subject: they are still concepts that define the way people see the world and themselves, even today.

This is also reflected by technology. The aforementioned author McLuhan described technology as the range of extensions of our own possibilities: the telephone extends the human voice, the car extends human mobility and the telescope extends human vision.¹ The advent of the computer seems to have reinforced Cartesian dualism that, moreover, considers calculating capacity an extension of intellectual capacity and its 'housing', the body, as nothing but a side effect. Despite this limitation people sometimes really identify with computers and use them as a metaphor for the brain, which they have come to understand in terms of 'hardware' and 'software'.² The way computers, especially mobile phones, are designed makes it easy for people to spend, apparently voluntarily, hours each day tied to a small screen that overburdens their eye-hand-brain coordination and results in eye complaints and narrow-mindedness. A poor version of progress, says Rosegaarde. This may sound strange, coming from a techno-optimist, but he doesn't mean to reject technology. Rather, it's a plea for an alternative in which (bio)technology, science, design and art come together as in his work, which he invariably describes as 'techno-poetry'. According to Rosegaarde this mix, in which the lines between the alpha and beta sciences are blurred, is the driving force behind social change.

THINKING BY BODY

To avoid reducing people to brains with eyes, *Presence* works with basic physical principles rather than with screens or sensors. The body as a whole functions as an interface between visitors and the world and all of their senses as well as sensorimotor capacities are involved. Looking, feeling, hiding, rolling, pushing, sitting or, if push comes to shove, lying down are all within the bounds of possibility.

It may hardly need stating, but human beings' particular incarnation determines the way they understand the world in the way that they do. People only have two arms rather than eight and eyes on one side of their heads rather than on all sides. According to American philosopher Mark Johnson, who studies the role of the body, it is the way people physically relate to their environment that produces meaning. People's

specific embodiment, their build and size determine how they move and how they manipulate things. Johnson claims such aspects generate fundamental concepts such as 'in front' and 'behind', 'in' and 'out', 'high' and 'low', 'from' and 'to', which form the basis for understanding and thinking about both concrete matters and complex and abstract concepts.³ It also appears that a lot of other types of knowledge, such as skills, are not 'in our heads', but rather in our bodies. This is called 'tacit knowledge': knowledge that is not easily transferred verbally – try explaining exactly how to make a sharp turn with a bike, or how to tie shoelaces.

THINGS TO THINK WITH

In the meantime, it is becoming increasingly clear that physical interaction affects our brain in yet another way as well. Our brains turn out to be more malleable and changeable than previously believed. This is called neuroplasticity and it means behaviour and interaction can actually change the brain. It is a process in which not only the environment, but also things and artefacts often play a key part. A well-known example is the study of London taxi drivers in whom a certain part of the brain was found to be better developed.⁴ Of course, these changes were only discernible after months or years of taxi driving, but even less lengthy activities can broaden the mind and increase cognitive skills. Think of making a jigsaw puzzle. Most people are much more successful at puzzle making if they get to try to fit the pieces by hand. It is precisely this manual puzzling that gives rise to ideas and solutions rather than merely looking and thinking.⁵ The idea that physical activity supports or is even part of mental processes such as thinking considerably blurs the lines between doing and thinking. Moreover, this also seems to apply to things and objects people use to support their thought processes. For some, this goes so far that they consider means to support thought processes, ordinary material objects such as notebooks, part of the mind as well.⁶

Interaction between human beings and inanimate objects not only produces positive effects. Think, for example, of quiet individuals who suddenly (temporarily) turn into dangerous speed freaks once they get

behind the wheel of a car. This illustrates that physical interaction in connection with certain environments or objects can, temporarily or permanently, create a structure in which actions and thinking can take on a different form.

CAPITAL

From this perspective, *Presence* can also be understood as an unexpected and exciting means to shake up and enlarge the framework in which people's activities and thoughts take place, even if it's only for a little while. Becoming aware, then, is also a physical activity with a cognitive dimension that creates new paths that elicit new reflections and contemplations that, as the example of the puzzle shows, would not have been possible by merely looking at and thinking about the work.⁷

Although *Presence* is the result of Rosegaarde's concern about the impact of our presence on earth this work, unlike making a puzzle, is not about achieving concrete results or finding solutions. Rather, it aims to realize a change of mindset and to stimulate people's imagination and creativity. This means *Presence* is also an experimental museum project, one that examines the medium 'exhibition'. Or in the words of Rosegaarde himself: 'I hope this exhibition will elicit people's hidden capital and show them as well as make them feel that they are present, not through a screen, but with their whole bodies, in the here and now. *Presence* is an undownloadable experience.'

- 1 McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man*, Routledge Classic, London/New York 2008
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- 3 Johnson, Mark, What Makes a Body?, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 22(3), Penn State University Press 2008, S. 159-169.
- 4 Maguire, Eleanor A. u.a., *Navigation-related structural change in the hippocampi of taxi drivers*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC18253/>, retrieved 29.05.2019.
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- 7 Simon Penny in Bianchini, Samuel, Verhagen, Erik, *Practicable, From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 2016, S. 67.

DAAN ROOSEGAARDE - PRESENCE

Colophon:

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