

The Future Never Sat Still
Elodie Evers in conversation with
Tiril Hasselknippe

Elodie Evers: I have the pleasure to talk to the artist Tiril Hasselknippe today, on the occasion of her solo exhibition *The Future Never Sat Still* at DREI - her Cologne-based Gallery. In the next two hours we will speak about waves of change, community building and a new world order!

But let's start with a few hard facts: Tiril, you were born in Norway in 1984 and studied at Malmö Art Academy. In 2010 you participated in the Cooper Union Exchange Program in New York. You lived there for a few years before moving back to Norway, where you are based now. Recent solo exhibitions of yours include *Magenta Plains*, New York, Kunstverein Braunschweig, and *Drei*, Cologne. Your work has been included in group exhibitions at The New Museum in New York, the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo, Künstlerhaus Bregenz amongst many others. You are also involved in various public art projects, something we will talk about later.

You create multilayered and multisensual installations at the junction of archeology and science fiction. These seemingly post-apocalyptic sceneries are highly symbolic and loaded thought experiments, eerie but at the same time optimistic takes on our socio-political climate. Usually your installations are massive in terms of their scale, their weight and volume: You like to work with industrial materials such as steel, concrete, plaster and have built survival stations, radio towers, balconies and aqueducts. But not in your current show at Drei, where for the first time you have experimented with stained glass.

Somewhere I read a quote of yours saying: I wish I could give a private tour to everybody. Why don't we begin with a mini virtual tour through your exhibition in Cologne.

Tiril Hasselknippe: So when you enter the gallery room from the street, you approach a stained glass wave sculpture on spindly legs right in the center of the space. It has a light inside of it and on top, as an extension of the rising wave, are grey buildings. It starts as a green turquoise organic wave and then it kind it rises up into these more block-like buildings. The light in the room is dimmed. So this will greet you as you enter the show and pull you in like a moth towards the flame.

EE: How big is the sculpture?

TH: The top of the buildings reaches my ribcage. So the table itself is 80 centimeters tall and then there's a good 55 centimeters on top of that. I always want you to encounter my work as bodies. Therefore the scale is kind of important. But the scale in this show is smaller than usual.

EE: What about the other room?

TH: You actually walk through the office space, where I am showing some drawings, to get to the next gallery room. There you have some cityscapes, buildings also made from stained glass that are suspended from the ceiling, almost like lanterns. One is a red cylinder with different gradients of red glass surrounding the building. One has a more triangular shape with blue, light blue and turquoise glass on the different sides of it. And then you have a cluster of blue, purple and lavender buildings together, five of them together that kind of make for a cityscape. So three light sources in a dim room, depicting urban lighthouses.

EE: You mentioned the wave sculpture in the first room. A wave that hit us very hard, pretty much exactly a year ago, was the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. You were making this work in the context of an immersive shift in our lives. How did this new world order affect the work and the production of the show?

TH: This show is the second part of a trilogy of sorts of presenting a non-linear idea of time in correlation with progress. It's an idea I've been tinkering with now for two years or so, at least a good while before the pandemic hit.

This imagery of the wave I have been wanting to present for a long time. I think of the endless energy in the ocean, where you can see the great explosion and culmination of traveled energy when the wave crashes on the shore, yet the energy isn't actually gone or lost, it's an endless drum swallowing itself again and again. Enveloping and unraveling. It takes different forms and can disappear out of sight but it is never more or less forceful. That's a way of thinking of time that's not linear, that's not disciplined into a line. It's a more human version of time and also more connected to nature. So when this pandemic actually hit us and our vocabulary and ideas of waves - now we're in the third wave in Europe - changed, it made me question if it was even ethical to make a work like this.

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EE: What do you mean by „if it was ethical“?

TH: To co-opt something that's now omnipresent in our everyday vernacular. We're talking about something that is descriptive of an ongoing societal trauma. It doesn't hit everyone in the same way. Vulnerable populations are more vulnerable than ever. So is it even ethical to use this metaphor to present something like how time intersects with change and progress? I have been working for a decade with ideas of the breakdown or the achilles heels of our democracy and the ways that things can fall apart. When things actually do fall apart on this massive scale, it feels very strange to make work. You never want to be correct about any negative projections about humanity. My work has previously circled around hygiene and entropy, the collapse of democracy, who gets to be included and who gets to be excluded in being taken care of and so on. This pandemic has been a real mindfuck.

EE: The tone of this show is tremendously different compared to previous shows of yours. Can you talk about the choice of material and the fragility and vulnerability that it stands for as opposed to previous work that you've done.

TH: Yeah, I've always wanted to be immersive and convincing about my presentation, to really take you there physically. I think of my shows as a stage or a set and you're the protagonist moving through it, that's always how I envision it, through the eyes and the body of the visitor. I really want people to feel and think at the same time. I've always made this analogy that, you know, different artists can play different instruments in a symphony. Some people are great at the flute and some people are great at the trumpet or a cello. I always wanted to just come in as a gong and do a big bang. And in this time and space that has transpired in the last year, I simply wanted to turn the volume down and inhabit a more vulnerable space. Vulnerable also in scale and material. The technique of stained glass is already so fragile and transparent, literally. It also corresponded to my experience of walking around in the city during lockdown and being so isolated from others, but also seeing existence through the lights in their windows. This very familiar scene that you have seen a million times over, people in their apartments cooking dinner or watching TV. The vantage point of the street had changed so much conceptually because you knew that you had no access to these people in an entirely different way than before. There are empty buildings in the show but it's really about this idea of seeing the light in the window of somebody else's apartment, almost like seeing a lighthouse on the coastline. It's a presence.

EE.: The title of your show, "The Future Never Sat Still", reminds me of an unruly child at the table.

TH: Exactly. I thought about the the future, almost like a person and how we can't really control it. Like the future was the person at the table sitting there with us and then it just got up from the table and we weren't ready for that!

EE: A clash with our human-centric ideas.

TH: Yes, it has its own opinions and agency, so to speak.

EE: You already mentioned that this work is part two of a trilogy that deals with the relation between time and progress. Part one is the piece Solar Dance of City Kernel from 2019. It is basically a steel maze with curved edges that is open at the top and the outside parts are higher than the inside, thus suggesting a protective function. It reminds one of a medieval city or a fortress. Orange lights and a fog machine create a strangely futuristic and yet historical atmosphere. Which concept of time were you suggesting with that work?

TH: I wanted to propose a city built in a different mindset. We are used to our streets and city centers to - at least in more modern times -, being built in a grid or linear way. I was thinking that maybe we make this grid not only for practical reasons, but because our idea of time is linear. So I thought what if you had a world, a place, a society who thought of time not as linear, but as more circular, even elliptical. In this case maybe they would even build their cities in a totally different fashion. So this city model, so to speak, is like an ellipsis.

EE: So you suggest that a more circular city would have an effect on our way of thinking and being in the world?

TH: I guess it's a thought experiment to share with the audience that comes to see the show. I was thinking how the idea of the future has changed a lot in recent years, even before this pandemic. I think it's connected to this Western capitalist ideology, our religion in many ways, that, as long as we just keep buying stuff, the future is always going to be better. More democracy, better science, better technology and medicine. The future was not something to be feared. We got to exist on autopilot, with no real responsibility of our role in the future. I think we have come to have to face a lot of things in the last few years which are imperative to deal with for the sake of our collective future(s). I was thinking how for long stretches of time, so maybe the flanks of this ellipsis I'm talking about, there's not much change and that's good and bad.

The curve of change isn't very angled and it gives us a sense of dependency and of false security, possibly. A lulling. But then you get into these moments in time, where you hit the corner and everything shifts direction and it feels like an upheaval and it can be either immensely productive or immensely unproductive, or both. But change is definitely happening in this period that we've been going through now, which is not the first time in history where you have a sharp turn and a lot of uprooting taking place in a short amount of time. And so that's how I was thinking, sort of rationalizing, sort of trying to put things into perspective, that it's not a linear progression, it's not going up or down, it's not even a pendulum. It's an echoing of these sociopolitical issues that if not actually dealt with, are just going to keep reappearing, keep wreaking havoc.

EE: And what is your proposal for the third part of the trilogy? Is that something still in the making?

TH: Yeah, I mean, it's still in the making in terms of it hasn't manifested itself in a show yet. But the idea is more in the line of parallel time, multiverses, similar and dissimilar things happening in different places. All that is connected to the quote by the author William Gibson; the future is already here, it's just not distributed very evenly. Actually going more into the sameness and the difference of the lived experience dividing populations, but also even in a more science fiction sphere of the different outcomes of similar problems. The multiple futures awaits.

EE: Something that is equally uncontrollable is our bodies. On a personal level, you were also occupied with a sharp turn. You were diagnosed with fibromyalgia in 2017, a disorder characterized by pain all over the body and accompanied by many different symptoms such as fatigue, sleep, memory and mood issues. I assume that you had been going through a lot already before you were diagnosed. How did you finally get the diagnosis?

I had previously gone to many different doctors and specialists over the years for the many individual symptoms, and no one had put them in correlation with each other, that they were interconnected. But I was going through an especially intense flare and I was feeling and thinking that I was dying, that my whole body was shutting down and I wouldn't have much time. I actually thought I was dying most of my twenties and it was a very heavy mindset to have. My relationship with art was always shaped by thinking I had a finite amount of time left. The pain was just so burning, so radiating, I felt my cells were dying. In 2017 I went to a doctor at The Cleveland Clinic and presented all of my symptoms, and after tests ruling out other illnesses I finally got my diagnosis of fibromyalgia.

EE: Do you remember the moment where you felt something was different with you?

TH: Yes, I do. As a young child I had extremely excruciating growing pains for instance. Which were probably growing pains, but filtered through this nerve disorder, so it's amplified to the max. And with it and many other symptoms, I was told that was normal – everybody has it. I mean, this was not purposefully done by my surroundings, but it becomes a gaslighting chain of events that makes you think that you're just bad at dealing with any pain or life in general. I internalized a lot of shame around the experience in my body and of feeling weak, of feeling like I couldn't handle stuff that everybody else handled. And I also have memories of migraine attacks as a small child which were very intense. But when your surroundings think you're complaining about a mild headache, one's experience of living gets conflated with being in pain. I feel a lot of empathy and sadness over the young child that didn't have the vocabulary for all this pain.

EE: And that didn't get the care that it needed so badly...

TH: Being so misunderstood that you start to misunderstand yourself and your whole perception of yourself is fundamentally warped. So there's a lot of shame built into it and I grew up in a family where illness and chronic illness in particular were some of the worst things you could have, like it's your own fault. A flawed character.

EE: It's much connected to what you said earlier about a concept of time where everything always gets better and where wellness has to be the standard mode of being. Sick bodies don't fit into the neoliberal regime.

TH: Exactly and that's not only the case in my family, it is the prevalent idea in our society that you're not worthy if you're not a highly functioning member of society by having a full time job, earning your share, by being as capable of doing anything as anyone else. And if you're less able, if you're less high functioning, you're less worthy. Possibly entirely unwanted by society. This is ableism.

EE: It reminds me so much about what the artist, musician and writer Johanna Hedva says in her Sick Women Theory: You don't need to be fixed, my queens, it's the world that needs fixing.

TH: Exactly this, and it's still a process for me. You can agree with something so fully, like I agree with that statement with my whole being, and I can still have internalized shame around my condition. It was such a relief to get a diagnosis, but it was also extremely difficult to have to face the reality and permanence of it and realize that it wasn't something transient that would go away with treatment. It is part of me and it has been a part of me and it will be a part of me. This has been difficult to come to terms with.

EE: Do the symptoms come in waves or are they always there?

I would say it's both. A presence all the time and it comes in waves. So there's a baseline of fatigue and pain and all kinds of other symptoms, like sleep disturbances and mood issues and cognitive issues, chronic migraines etc. But then I have waves, or flares as you call it in fibromyalgia, where your symptoms in a period of time get much, much worse and your ability to function gets decreased. I can handle the baseline fairly well, the flares are more difficult to handle. Both handle as a person having to deal with it and then, of course, as an artist, and a professional meeting deadlines etc. So I'm never pain-free, but the amount of pain has different volume and impact levels.

EE: How have your surroundings responded when you started talking about it?

TH: That's a tricky question, because I guess it was side by side of myself understanding it, and it's a hard thing to explain and it's a hard thing for others to really grasp. And I think because of my personality, people keep forgetting about it. It's kind of an awkward thing to keep reminding people that I'm actually quite sick and not just sick at the moment, but sick permanently. It's difficult for people to see me when I'm energetic and then understand that that half an hour of conversation will then lead me to have to rest for a day.

EE: How do you cope?

TH: The day after I got my diagnosis, by random timing, I adopted my rescue dog, Saga, who is the most amazing dog. But we've had to be really patient with her because of her past trauma. And I have realized through working on building her confidence and improving her quality of life that there were some parallels there. This patience and empathy had to extend to myself also.

EE: In a previous conversation that we had, you mentioned that you are a sheer believer when it comes to art. What do you mean by this?

TH: I was 19 when I discovered what contemporary art is and it was a revelation! I went to this art program because I was fond of drawing and painting. I had not graduated from high school, so I couldn't go to university. So it was a bit of a gap year type of art program thing. I had this art history teacher teaching us about everything from the time of the 50s until the early 2000s. And she was so incredibly enthusiastic. It really hit my heart. I thought that contemporary art was the intersection of philosophy, critical theory and collective thinking, and visual output and creation. And I just thought, whoa, I can't believe this exists. I thought it was the most magical thing of all time. And so I really fell deeply in love with it. And I still feel that way. So yes, I think that I approach it very much like a believer.

EE: You are involved with many other projects beyond the white cube, especially with public art projects. Let's speak about your new work for the Norwegian School of Economics in Bergen. It looks like a bronze version of the sculpture we talked about, Solar Dance of City Kernel. Why did you suggest this piece for this particular context?

TH: I was contacted by the Office for Public Art in Norway who had in turn been contacted by the School of Economics because they wanted to have a public artwork at their campus. Previously, I've always had a relatively easy connection to the public art space that I've done work for, and this is my fifth public artwork in seven years. The School of Economics felt quite far away from my world as an artist. Therefore I was wondering how to enter it. But if you really think about it, there is an immense privilege in being able to „talk to“ people who are different from you and not only preaching to your own choir. It's possible we have a lot of common ground, this particular audience and I. But if we didn't, maybe it's more important than ever to exchange some ideas. For me the work Solar Dance of City Kernel is also connected to regulations that were in place in Scandinavia from the early nineteenth century onwards. It constituted of several building codes that ensured that there would be a certain amount of light falling into every single unit, every single apartment, every single room, so that nobody would live in complete darkness and nobody would have all the access to the light. So they would have to be able to calculate how many hours of sunlight each unit would have. And they couldn't build a building that was facing north or have the buildings too close together because it was considered, especially in Scandinavia, where there's a lack of light half of the year, that it would really be detrimental to people's living experience. This code has been thrown out recently. And it's only been thrown out because it's not profitable, so it's a casualty of capitalism. I thought that it could be like an important example, an important thought experiment for the people who are studying finance and models of growth and profit. It's located outside on what they call their "sun terrace", which I thought was a nice connection.

EE: Is there any information that goes with it? Considering the complexity of your works and the many ideas that go into it, this must be a huge topic for you.

TH: There will be a permanent sign close to the sculpture that gives basic information, almost like you have in the gallery with a press release. So the whole statement about the private tours to everyone, it's both that I have so much that I want to talk about to a viewer, but also that I really believe in the back and forth, and in their perception being valid and important to the work. Sometimes with the plaque or press release being very prescriptive and brief, I feel a bit like I'm missing out on the perspective of the viewer.

EE: I was amazed by the little educational videos that you post on Instagram. I remember one where you're sitting on the stairs in front of your New York apartment or studio with your welding helmet on and you are welding a sculpture. You explain every single step from the welding itself to how to hold the different parts, how to change the wire and the gas and you explain it as if you were making a coffee. I felt great pleasure in watching a woman working with these materials that are still so male-associated. And I think it really demystified the whole thing extremely. Why do you make them?

TH: I find it so rewarding to make these little, very casual but earnest productions of how-tos. When I entered sculpture, I don't know if it was late, but I was already at the academy, I had already done a lot of work. I was like a complete novice approaching the three dimensions, I had no prior knowledge. I was an amateur, so to speak, and that opened up so much freedom to play and for invention. But at the same time, I felt the difficulty in learning while feeling like I wasn't allowed to inhabit that space, and that can be real however you identify as a person.

Imposter syndrome can be one description but it's really connected to the toxic masculinity and gender-based ideologies and tropes in our society as well. And so I really want to make people feel like this is not so hard. This could be for you. When you do start learning how to weld, or build, or cast, you can feel so stupid. There's a million ways to get stuck when starting out, and every little thing can go wrong and then you'll have a question for that. I wanted to really pull it apart and enter it from a human perspective and not from the authoritarian stance of: I know everything, you know nothing. I equally want to give everybody a welding course basically.

EE: Did you think about becoming a teacher? Because, coming back to what you said earlier about your art teacher, it seems really important to you to pass on some of that belief in and excitement for contemporary art.

TH: I've done workshops with different organizations like Wide Rainbow in New York, for instance, and when I've done shows at institutions we have often hosted a workshop with their youth outreach programs. And I've also taught sculpture and science fiction at academies. And I find that extremely rewarding and exciting. I've thought about the possibility of organizing a program like that for underserved youths, and I hope that's in my future. It also makes me feel like art is more than just a C.V. Art is more than thinking of yourself and thinking of how to further your own career and what the next step is. It's about opening it up. I just want to make sure that I can balance all these things. But that is actually a huge goal of mine to be able to open up art and art-making for a part of the population that is not in touch with it at the moment. I really think it should be accessible to everyone.

– Elodie Evers is a curator and author based in Berlin