

8 MARCH — 7 JUNE 2020

YES, PLEASE!

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We are confronted with sex on a daily basis through porn websites, on dating apps, and in the media. They all give us a forced perspective of how sex should look and feel. We collectively suffer from performance pressure. Are our bodies attractive enough? What does the other person want? Are we truly enjoying it? There is one place, however, where we do not feel any pressure and are free to experiment: our imagination.

Over the past two years, theater and design collective Company New Heroes has researched the erotic imagination of Dutch and Flemish people. Interviewers went to festivals with a caravan equipped with audio equipment to collect more than 300 fantasies. This collection forms the basis for the exhibition *Yes, Please!*, for which Marres has been transformed into a house of the senses. A series of themed rooms invites visitors to lounge, watch, feel, listen and read, while travelling through a variety of sensual worlds.

INTERVIEW

LUCAS DE MAN

Initiative and dramaturgy

PASCAL LÉBOUCQ

NAOMI JANSEN

VIVIEN VUONG

Design

MARC ALBERTO

Sound

31 January & 5 February
Valentijn Byvanck

VULNERABILITY

LUCAS: This project started with Nancy Friday's book *My Secret Garden* (1973), about female fantasies. Friday interviewed women about sexuality when it was still a taboo topic. I was fifteen, read all these interviews and thought: Wow. Is this all part of a human? Many years later, we interviewed sexologists after the theatrical piece 'De man is lam' (The man is numb), who told us that young men and women are increasingly dealing with performance issues. They all felt that they were not performing well enough in bed. I wanted to research this. The experts blame it on stress, but I think it is related to a taboo on vulnerability. Sex is universal, but eroticism is unique and deeply personal. Vulnerability requires openness, sharing, admitting. That is very interesting to me. It's not about the questions: How to have sex? Where are the G-spot, O-spot or Q-spot? These are things you can learn. By the way, for one person these spots work wonders, for others they don't add to the experience at all. Privately figuring out what it is that you want is complicated. It requires dialogue, in the first place with oneself. We encountered a lot of shame in the interviews: the self-censorship is huge. Imagine having to share your fantasies with others.

My initial idea was to ask well known authors to write erotic stories. We would have these narrated by the most beautiful voices. Listeners would be able to choose which voice they preferred. For some listeners this worked very well, for others not at all. We decided to change directions. We put out a call for people to share their own stories in Marc's studio. Ten people replied. With the very first interviewee, a woman, we felt we made the right decision because it was *her* story: she owned it.

MARC: It is very exciting to hear another person getting aroused, even when you do not particularly share their preferences or fetishes. This is universally exciting, as people are essentially empathetic.

LUCAS: The woman in the studio taught me that you shouldn't try to make eroticism a universal thing. You simply can't. What I love is the complete diversity and variety. This means, however, that you have to interview a lot of people. We created a mobile recording studio in a caravan we named Bolleke. Singer/actress Wende Sniijders invited me to present a show on the festival Lowlands. We were allowed to park our caravan on the festival grounds and I used the show to interview Wende about her erotic fantasies. She agreed, as long as she could interview me as well. This was a great success. After this, we were invited to many other festivals. We did over a hundred interviews I believe, with famous celebrities as well as dishwashers. This was amazing, although some people put on an act which meant losing the very core of it: vulnerability.

NAOMI: I was also interviewed during a live show. Because it was in front of a live audience, I turned it more into a narrative. If I would have been interviewed in a caravan, I would have been able to be more vulnerable.

MARC: The fact that you dare to share does not per definition mean that it doesn't matter what you say. I believe you will always be vulnerable. But you can also suppress this, of course. In the studio-interviews, you can hear the hesitation, the shame, and vulnerability that is sometimes laughed off during live shows.

PASCAL: An erotic thought or experience is so quick and fleeting, you can always catch a part of it, freeze it and turn it into a story, but at the same time it is something ever evolving. It makes sense to tell your fantasy like an anecdote, but that is not where the magic is.

INTERVIEWS

LUCAS: In an interview, you explore with the people you interview what it is that arouses them. In one single day, we interviewed four women who all wanted to be taken roughly, in the kitchen by either a man or woman. we asked: Who is entering the kitchen? Do you know them? Are you the one having sex, or is it someone else? Can you make out a face? Are they wearing clothes? You need all these sort of details to find out what exactly is happening. What seems to be four times the same fantasy turns out to be four completely different stories. For one person, it was all about the sex: the roughness, the physical touch, nails. She did not see a face. She didn't know what the kitchen looked like. In fact, the kitchen didn't even matter. What counted was the element of surprise. For another person, it was more about the idea of someone being so turned on that he just wanted her. She knew very well who he was, someone she couldn't get. In her fantasy, she was so sexy that this person could not contain himself. He had come to her place and took her, *wham*, on the kitchen table like that. I believe that when people realize what arouses them, whether it is physically rough or exciting, or with another girl who is so hot you cannot contain yourself, that it helps to understand their own eroticism.

We discovered several patterns throughout the stories. Many people describe something visually, which makes the point of view important. I am standing here and am looking at this, or someone is looking at me. The second important thing is touch. Being touched or not being touched. Being touched gently, harshly, roughly, intensely. Last but not least: in your fantasy, you're always very desirable. The biggest difference between man and women in heterosexual fantasies, so we discovered, is that men perform well in their stories, do things which make the other person extremely happy. Men, in their fantasies, are focused on the other person



being aroused and getting them to climax. Women, in their fantasies, are not bothered by men. They are focused on enjoying the moment intensely. It is completely about them. That's how they define their freedom: to be able to let go completely or to have everything come naturally. For some people, their fantasies reflect something they miss in their day-to-day life. Others want more than they already have. How they come to their fantasy might be different, but it always ends up to be about freedom and letting go.

MARC: In their fantasies, people are often talking about fabrics: latex, satin, or yoga pants for example. This points to people having a very specific feeling about seemingly small details in their fantasies. A homosexual man told me he is very turned on by satin. This is due to the fact that when he was younger, before coming out, he had a crush on soccer players who wore satin shorts.

NAOMI: It is often the context of a fabric in a specific setting that defines the arousal: in which situation and with whom. I can imagine the body being most important in a fantasy, a situation that is sweaty and involves tight clothing. This makes the specific fabric of the yoga pants less relevant.

LUCAS: I notice that clothing is often considered more important than the sex itself. It covers, or it doesn't, it is being ripped open, torn apart, there is wet clothing, dry clothing... The story rarely touches upon the sexual act itself. 90% results in sex eventually, but that is not the essence of the fantasy, it's about the journey towards it. Also when there is no clothing involved at all. There was one guy, in my opinion the most beautiful story, who talks about a certain look from a woman he encounters. She wants him, and he wants her. They have sex. If you ask what kind of sex, there is no specific story. That look is what counts.

Many people are a character as well as spectator in their fantasies. They go back and forth between the two. We also

found people who start their fantasies differently each time, but always return to the same core. We always ask the interviewee to describe the person who is having sex in their fantasy. Some people explain that they see themselves having sex, but twenty years older. Others see themselves, but completely different. In any case, they are always more beautiful, more confident, sexier, more attractive than in real life. Just a version of themselves that is not afraid, but free. Some are free and claim to be even bolder in their fantasies. Yet others claim to be shy in their daily life, but more daring in their fantasies, or tell that they desire something that can only exist in their fantasies. In my own erotic fantasy, everything becomes fluid, the idea of melting together and letting go of control, not having to think about anything anymore, just being allowed to be myself. For me, this is how eroticism differs from sex. Sex is a very present minded act with a clear target. For me, eroticism is a form of not being, complete freedom. The moment where you are allowed to let go.

We divided the fantasies in nine head categories. Multiple people; Power, control, rough sex; Novelty, adventure, and variety; Taboos & forbidden sex; Sharing partners & non-monogamy; Romance & passion; Erotic flexibility; Reliving; and Focus & sensation. Seven of these are pulled from an earlier research involving four thousand people by American psychologist Justin Lehmiller from 2018. Lehmiller asked people what their favorite fantasy was and how they would capture that fantasy in just one word. That is how these categories were defined. We added the last two categories. The research continues. There are a lot of things we haven't heard yet. I was expecting more games, people fantasizing to have sex with Fortnite creatures for example. We also didn't find homosexuals who fantasize about having sex with a woman, or men who would like to be women or the other way around, or examples of genderfluid sex.

There are also a lot of people who do not want to have a certain fantasy. Because they're ashamed of it, for instance with scatophilia, or because it is prohibited, with

for instance pedophilia. Sex with children is the most complicated, this taboo is too big. Pedophiles don't register for an interview. The second biggest category is the fantasy of being raped, SM, and dominance. We spoke to several women who fantasize about being raped, but don't actually want to fantasize about this. These are young, independent women who feel this fantasy diminishes who they want to be. But a fantasy of being raped, doesn't per definition mean you want to be dominated. The fantasy reflects your desires. You are dominant. In SM-bondage, the questions is always who has more power. The answer is the sub, of course, as they invite the other person and are able to stop when they feel the need to.

There is no standard correlation between reality and fantasy. Everything you do sexually, feeds who you are and how you fantasize. If I were to lock you up for twenty years, your fantasies will intensify. If you have a lot of sex with ten people at the same time, it could be that your fantasies will be less prominent. A desire is something you would like to do someday. A fantasy is something that arouses you. Images that turn you on, are not things you have to experience in real life. We have heard everything: people who have had a threesome which was just as exciting as in their fantasies. Or people who hated it and went back to their fantasies or who had developed new fantasies. As you go along, the fantasy is being refined, or the fantasy becomes stronger because reality is getting involved.

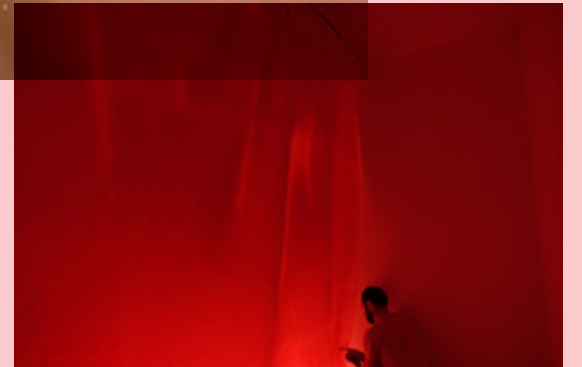
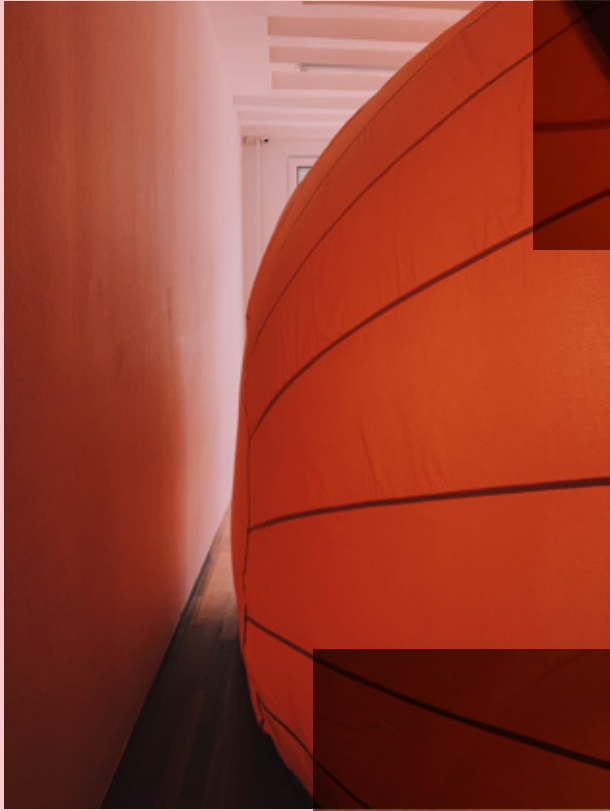
I don't believe that fantasy can be created. That would reduce a fantasy to a story, and making stories is not the essence of fantasy. A fantasy can also revolve around color, about cold on skin, a sensory experience. Moreover, if a fantasy could be created, you could erase pedophilia or we all could be made to fantasize about something the government would like us to fantasize about. I don't believe in that.

THE EXHIBITION

PASCAL: The assignment to design this exhibition was a huge challenge for me, because everyone has their own erotic experience. Therefore, it was important to create a design team with Marc, Naomi and Vivien, to gather and combine different perspectives. At the same time, I believe you need a healthy dose of egoism as a designer and theater maker to do things that you like to do. If you don't let the design flow from there, you will never be able to inspire others. Eroticism is often delaying, taking detours, and even repetition of experiences. How can you create that in a scenographic manner, so visitors will be slowed down or need to take a detour in order to get to the actual experience? How can you guide a visitor through such an experience?

LUCAS: What I like about an exhibition is that you create a world, especially at Marres, where you can dive into and are allowed to feel, do, search and be. I visited Marres several times before we proposed the exhibition and I thought how cool would it be if visitors could explore the things that stimulate them? The exhibition touches the undercurrent of fantasy. The desire of touch, shame, searching, sound, feel, vibration. Visitors dive into the stories, in the multitude of fantasies. They visit because they expect it to be stimulating, or because they hope that it will be better than expected, in any case there is some sort of excitement. I think this is very good: we will only start up the process.

NAOMI: For me, the exhibition is about materiality: feeling and touching. I find an exhibition where you are not allowed to touch anything or can't get close to the works very off putting. I experience my body by feeling, smelling or hearing something, and that happens here. Even when you're alone in the exhibition your body can explore everything.



MARC: Before we started to record a hundred and thirty hours of interviews, we thought well and deep about what people will be listening to. I searched for the things between the stories, that tell us something about the way people express their fantasy. You discover that the most used word 'yes' is, and the second most used word 'uh'. These are thousands of interjections that reflect all sorts of things: hesitation, feeling, maybe re-experience or doubt on how to phrase things. I collected all these interjections and these sounds to build the soundscapes. There are other sounds as well. For me, it is very important that the sound together with the experience and materiality of the space, tapestry for example, forms a physical experience. We create resonances which stem from the materials. These can be vibrations, or whispering voices, sounds which people can associate with even when it isn't per definition sexual. We want to arrange the space of the exhibition openly, and invite and trigger visitors. We need to reflect the fantasies and vulnerability around them in all openness.

PASCAL: I think all the different voices, all the coughs and sighs and breaks, contain a huge erotic charge, aside from the actual fantasy they describe. It's a pity we don't have more dialects or languages: from Limburg, or Russian, Italian.

LUCAS: Pascal, Marc, Vivien en Naomi have been testing materials for months now. How can you work with human skin, or with seeing other visitors, or play with shadows? We build a certain tension. Pascal chose not to rebuilt Marres, but rather to keep the house as it is and install spaces within it. That was a very conscious choice because by doing this, you can see that it's a 19th century house with rooms/ In this exhibition, you can see other visitors read erotic fantasies, but you never know which. You can listen to a story where someone is being tied up and taken roughly while the person next or across from you might be listening to something completely different. Seeing, being seen, to feel the tension, to

trigger: it's about more than just feeling the space and listening to erotic fantasies.

PASCAL: An important thing for the scenography is that the visitors are essential for the experience of the exhibition. Looking at someone else, especially if this person feels or looks intensely, is erotic.

NAOMI: We were constantly looking at the effect of the presence of other visitors and how we could stimulate that effect even more by design.

MARC: The exhibition should facilitate that effect. People should be open, sensory alert and relaxed as much as possible. How do you build towards that?

ROOMS

PASCAL: My favorite experiment is *The Membrane*, in Marres' ballroom. Not just because of what happens inside it, but also the experience outside of it. Because you actually experience from the inside what's happening on the outside. We approached the house as if it were a human body. Why a body? Everyone knows the desire to nestle inside a body, to be able to smell it, caress it, the intimacy and intense way of experiencing it. Our challenge was to translate this into a space that you have to physically touch in order to even get inside. We wanted visitors, as soon as they got inside, to forget that there are other people in the space and experience almost the same intimacy and intensity as when they are in bed with their loved ones. We want visitors to lose themselves in the tactile experience of intimacy and sense, without being ashamed of it.

NAOMI: For me, *The Kitchen* is the most exciting space. I feel that way because it is the most everyday setting in a house, where you sit at the table with other people and share certain actions. A living room is a more passive space and a bathroom links more easily to nudity. A kitchen, in contrast, is a very neutral space. At Marres, you are guided towards it through a narrow space, which I found very exciting, especially for people who have never been here before. For me, a fantasy is not just loving and gentle, it always contains something undefined. I hope that the kitchen will create that effect as well: when you enter and other visitors are sitting at the table, maybe you hesitate a little and carry a certain tension with you into the space. Marres is no ordinary exhibition space. You can truly use the space to its full capacities to also highlight these heavier, tense layers of eroticism.

VIVIEN: It's also a kind of mirror you hold up to yourself. How far will you go? How curious are you? What tempts you? These things tell a lot about yourself. It can be

very interesting to see others taking a step further than you. The exhibition triggers curiosity, stimulates your senses and invites you to dive deeper into your own imagination.

The Fireplace, the room with the carpet, started with an image. In the space, you can imagine the carpet beginning to come alive, and inviting visitors to play with it. The invitation visitors create by crawling underneath the carpet, or by lying on top of it or walk over it, brings a new kind of experience. Such carpets are very sensuous, they are soft, have sinuous shapes and even color. We created a situation in which it is very comfortable to stay, where visitors can relax and reflect and also invite other visitors in. We hope to discover a new world from under the carpet. When other people join in that experience, it becomes extra exciting.

PASCAL: I hope that people discover new nooks and crannies in their own home after visiting the exhibition. Maybe they will start doing it underneath or on top of the tapestry, or rolled up inside it. That is the beauty of Marres: it is a house and not a big warehouse or museum. You constantly feel the intimate scale, which connects your fantasy to a situation that can also be experienced at home.

VIVIEN: *The Skin*, the room with a latex wall, should remind visitors of skin. We know latex from the skin-tight suits, but the material is actually very sensible on its own as well. Visitors should really touch and feel this. Pascal initially named it the wet room, which I played with as well, with glycerine, water, scent and humidity.

PASCAL: Everyone has a lingering hunger for skin. We feed that hunger by offering visitors a surface of five bodies they can touch all at once.



EFFECT AND AFTERMATH

LUCAS: The project has done a lot for me. For starters, I have more fantasies thanks to this project. Recognizing it for yourself is step one. Then sharing it with someone else afterwards is essential, which doesn't mean you should tell them everything. But it means letting someone inside your world. The other person should understand the core of your arousal. You can fantasize seven hundred thousand stories or images, but the core counts. And I again realize that everyone is different, one is highly sensitive, the other wants a story, another thrives on circumstances, energy or emotions.

NAOMI: I hope that the exhibition gives visitors the feeling that they are allowed to have sexual fantasies. Whether you share them with others or not, doesn't matter, as long as you don't disconnect from your fantasies.

PASCAL: Aside from the book or the exhibition, the important question is how you can feed or inspire yourself in your daily life. *Yes, Please!* aspires to activate visitors. This rich palette of fantasies inspires you to extend your own activity. I would love to block off my agenda for the duration of the exhibition, to come in every day and experience what happens. There are doors being opened and you can't predict what situations will occur.

MARC: The most important reason for me to do this project is to give sexually and gender-marginalised people space for their stories. To be able to name your identity or to wear a specific flag is a very important link to citizenship. I have a lot of friends who are being forced to stay inside the closet by their environment and who suffer from this for years. For these people, it is very important to be offered a space without any judgement. In further research, I would like to offer more space to this vulnerable group.

LUCAS DE MAN (1982, Belgium) is the creative director of the Amsterdam Light Festival starting in 2020. He graduated in Germanic Languages from the University of Leuven, after which he studied directing at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. In addition to his work as artistic director of Company New Heroes, De Man works as a (freelance) director, actor and concept developer. He presents various cultural TV programs including Kunstuur (AVROTROS), often hosts large and small events in the Netherlands and Belgium, and is occasionally a guest lecturer.

PASCAL LÉBOUCQ (1981, Belgium) is a designer and scenographer. Leboucq was classically trained as a sculptor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, and specialized as a public space designer at the Design Academy in Eindhoven. Next to his autonomous work, he works as a freelance scenographer for various theatre companies. Leboucq is also a core member of Company New Heroes as head of design. With this company, he creates urban, mostly bio-based art installations and multidisciplinary scenographies.

NAOMI JANSEN (1994, The Netherlands) is a freelance designer. After graduating from Media and Culture at the University of Amsterdam in 2016, she has been involved in various projects of Company New Heroes since 2018, both in graphic design and scenography. She is currently continuing her studies at the Willem De Kooning Academy in Rotterdam to become a Visual Arts and Design Teacher.

VIVIEN VUONG (1989, The Netherlands) graduated as a designer from the Design Academy Eindhoven. Her design process focuses on experiments with materials, sensual interactions and stories with impact that stimulate the brain as well as the senses. With this experimental practice, she wants to shape new relationships, provoke aesthetic interactions and connect through design.

MARC ALBERTO (1990, Curaçao) is a composing and performing multi-instrumentalist & producer, involved in collaborative work as well as solo performative & improvised explorations. Marc works from a self-described “contextual, non-idiomatic” basis. For the past 10 years, Marc has found a unique voice in a carousel of projects whose variety reflects their mixed cultural background.

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And all the people who have been so open and honest in sharing their erotic fantasies with us.

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Marres, House for Contemporary Culture is located in the heart of the old town of Maastricht. Marres develops a new vocabulary for the senses in collaboration with artists, musicians, designers, chefs, and perfumers. In addition to bringing a lively program of exhibitions, presentations and performances, Marres also features a beautiful garden and a wonderful restaurant.



COLOPHON

Initiative and dramaturgy: Lucas De Man
Design: Pascal Leboucq together with Naomi Jansen, Vivien Vuong
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