

Moniek Toebosch, speech for presentation of the Arti Medaille, 2009

(English translation by Caitlyn van der Kaap)

What is the significance of an oeuvre, I wondered...

What kind of oeuvre are we talking about?

A clear, compelling, well-crafted, megalomaniacal, important, mythical, groundbreaking, surprising, modest, unbearable, insubstantial, interesting, invisible, pleasant, enviable, incomplete, exhaustive, hysterical, colorful, skillful, or perhaps a dark oeuvre?

What is the true significance of a collection of artworks

which, when considered as a whole, forms an immaterial storage of ideas, where every thought seems to be illuminated by a golden beam, because year after year, translated into material form, exhibited, preserved, admired, and successful – works of which even the waste still testifies of the mastermind that stands / stood behind the series of works

What is the significance of an artist's oeuvre

that, besides its grandiose storage in museum basements, is also kept in leftover spaces of buildings, homes, and studios, on high shelves and hard drives: an oeuvre hidden from the outside world, consisting not only of old-format videotapes, paintings, and sculptures, but also stacks of catalogues, silk screen prints, and other prints that seem to wither away, waiting for another retrospective or group exhibition, a second chance at the *Slegte* [second-hand bookstore], or a football club collecting old paper?

What is the significance (for the development of the arts) of a more or less consistent, more or less predictable collection of works and ideas that reveals itself in narrow corridors where heirs, family, and friends are confronted for the first time with the actual volume of work – sketchbooks, notebooks – and, alongside that, with the lifestyle of a barely known aunt or uncle, father or mother?

Curious, they enter the house (he was always a bit cranky) walk through the studio (she always wore a strange scarf) and see the raw storage of artworks that most resembles a three-dimensional photograph of a bomb explosion, arranged according to a strict hierarchy: heavy pieces below, lighter ones on top. Sagging shelves filled from front to back: leaning warriors, a wood-veneered U-matic recorder, hundred paintings wrapped in thick plastic, hundreds of speakers of different sizes scattered on the floor, stainless steel remnants of a project in a fortress, a chaos of collected wooden planks – thick, thin, short, long – always potentially useful, cables and wires of all types and ages everywhere, a thick roll of drawing paper with a diameter of 40 centimeters, electronic spaghetti neatly rolled and packed in rows of four, once described as an important work within the oeuvre, now waiting for restoration into audible form.

Looking over this organised chaos, feeling at loss, the question arises: what to do with this collection, this unknown world? Preserve it, register it, document it, scan it? Shall we make another book about it, who will pay? And then what? Establish a foundation, for eternity or just ten years? Who will bear the costs, who will research, who will maintain it, who pays the rent, who dares to select, who throws things away, who is ultimately responsible, family or friends?

This specific group dynamic unfolds while the artist in question quietly turns around in their grave, leaving friends and family behind as the **Responsible Ones**.

What are we, as a community, as makers and art lovers, to make with all these oeuvres, this kilometers-long storage of good intentions, brilliant attempts, and tragic misunderstandings? From sweetly melodious pastorals to blocks of polystyrene that, according to the manual, must be assembled with **satay sticks (not toothpicks!)**, from test prints, to rotogravure and editions of 250 to 500, so many of which still await a buyer?

Who is responsible for all these inherited oeuvres, into which governments, provinces, cities, parents, spouses, friends, and patrons have invested money, and which lie buried like gold beneath sand and stones, waiting to be excavated, rediscovered, or even reinvented? There is little time left to think about an oeuvre before the debt collector knocks on the door, clears out the studio, and throws the entire lot into containers.

What, then, is the significance of the entirety of all these works, of every thought, bits or bytes into which love, attention, and effort were poured, works that yielded both success and harsh criticism, that were debated in newspapers and magazines, where critics voiced their pros and cons, yes, works that even prompted parliamentary questions, old and new work that, due to “tragic circumstances,” is now called upon to answer questions we must always ask of any inherited, or yet-to-be-inherited, oeuvre: **what is its significance, for whom, for what, and who will know in the future?**

What do we do with it? What is in your interest and ours?

Should it be preserved for eternity? Is it significant enough, and how do you know?

Which artists or art historians are willing to devote their heart and soul to documenting, restoring, and classifying the work of a good friend, a fine artist, not world-class perhaps, but nevertheless meaningful and beautiful?

Often, towards the end of a long life or after the death of a beloved artist, a group of like-minded people gather to add something to the brilliant, or perhaps mad, history of the artist in question, perhaps because no book had yet been devoted to them, or because the work did not seem ready, or because the artist had not been active long enough – although nowadays someone already has a retrospective catalogue before the work has even been exhibited.

In short, if everyone believes in it, the oeuvre generates new powers that neither the artist themselves, nor a museum or gallery, was able to instill in it. The oeuvre left behind thus compels us to reflect on it in retrospect and to give it its rightful place in the history of the future.

Proposition 1:

Every oeuvre deserves a “building”, in other words, sincere attention, a space, a room, a shelf, a book, even if printed and bound by HEMA.

The oeuvre:

Falls apart into arms and legs, head and torso.

It represents the cohesion between dream and action, and can always be represented differently depending on the questions asked of it. A world of possibilities of which often only a few works ever see the light of day, sometimes only once, before falling asleep again on the shelves, until that one man, that inquisitive woman, that clever young lady makes connections between the present and what lies on the shelves. So, there is always hope and reason to preserve, to keep stock, to create new

work, without worrying about consistency or importance, because that is determined by time, by scholarship, by you and me

[Proposition 2]

The artist has the duty to properly document, carefully store, and protect their work during their lifetime as if it were their own children.

[Proposition 3]

An oeuvre only becomes truly interesting by revealing the artist's personal and intimate events; this allows for identification with it.

[Proposition 4]

"My oeuvre is better than myself"
(Jan Fabre)

[Proposition 5]

Every interesting oeuvre must be recorded, digitally archived, and exhibited ...