

## The approach

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# An Interview with Germaine Kruij

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Germaine Kruij's 'Circle Dance', 2012, Art Unlimited, Basel

Germaine Kruij's work often exaggerates or isolates the durational and immaterial elements of a given institutional or architectural context. Her project 'A Possibility of an Abstraction', ongoing since 2011, attempts to capture phenomenological events and affects through installations and performances, frequently via the geometric language of modernist abstraction. Her performances 'Circle Dance' and 'Carry On' take up questions of perception that extend to the disciplinary gaze of the institution and its economic conditions. Through repetition and endurance, these performances examine how contemporary public spaces variously engender an ethics of reciprocity or a culture of alienation and isolation.

*Annie Godfrey Larmon: In the performance 'Circle Dance', you feature a whirling dervish who is devoid of signifiers – his costume, music and traditional setting are rendered secular. A Dervish, of course, is one who*

*follows a Sufi Muslim ascetic path, renouncing mundane pleasures and often living in poverty. The performance of whirling reflects an attempt to reach a religious transcendence. Both of the spaces in which this work has been shown, Art Basel Unlimited and in a shopping mall in Utrecht as part of 'Call of the Mall', have been highly commercial. Could you talk about the implications of this?*

Germaine Kruij: For Art Basel, I was thinking about the concept of 'unlimited', and monumentality, and the enormous market that accompanies it. I felt a necessity to show something completely different, that wasn't connected to some unlimited materiality, or some limitless object. *Circle Dance* is static, the gesture simply repeats, but around it, everything is changing. I see this as a condition of art more generally; a piece won't change physically over time, but its endurance, and the continuity of its story allows change to occur somewhere else, to affect its context, or its radiance. This shift can't be captured. *Circle Dance* came out of my interest in the transcendent, and the possibility of a movement consuming a whole space that is otherwise chaotic. It was interesting to enter the space of Art Basel Unlimited without any materials, just the existing light and walls, one person, one gesture. We produced an effect that can't be framed. The Sufi dancer gestures one hand toward the sky and the other towards the ground. This connects the higher spirits with the mundane, and produces a channel. The circle he dances is meant to spread this channelled energy around and distribute it to the viewers. Of course this comes into conflict with the setting of the fair, of collectors searching for something they don't know yet, or can't name. In a way, this work is not entirely a critique, but also a mimesis. I see many collectors who are driven to art in an almost religious way, looking for something they don't have an answer to yet.



*AGL: For the exhibition at Grazer Kunstverein, the Sufi dancers performed in the shape of a square, recalling Bruce Nauman's 1967 'Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)'. What happened to the transcendent quality of the work when it was rooted more firmly in a history of conceptual art and performance than religious tradition?*

GK: I've been working for over a year with a number of Sufi dancers, and have become especially close with two brothers who perform with me. My initial intervention was already so significant, to request that they not wear traditional costumes, hats, or be accompanied by music – but these dancers were so open. I wanted to

enter into a dialogue with them, as they viewed their performance within the context of art as being similar to that of religion. Both are, in a way, about transcendence. I wondered what would happen when the *Circle Dance* moved into another geometric language of abstraction. So the dancer began the performance by stepping or tracing a square, which defined an architectural space, a stage where the circle dance would occur afterward. This square signified the material parameters of the experience – the ground, walls, and ceiling – and when he began moving in a circle, this stage dissolved, was surpassed. He closed the ritual with another square, re-framing the space, and bringing the audience back to the white cube of the gallery.



*AGL: This idea of dissolving the square as some proto-architectural signifier resonates with a question I have about your approach to objects more generally in your practice. The title of this body of work, 'A Possibility of an Abstraction', suggests the notion of capture, or an emergence that accumulates out of chaos. How do you value objects, or the materialization of these abstractions, within your work?*

GK: The title of this work also implies, to me, the impossibility of abstraction. Each time you perceive an object, your imagination fills the space between the object and your image of it. My objects are vehicles; they point outwards, rather than inward. They reflect their surroundings more than themselves, and they are devoid of my signature. I see them as windows, or tools, that direct to something other. My practice is often about the space between pieces more than the works themselves.

I struggle a lot with the object. For an early work, *Daytime* (2004), I wanted the light from outside to reflect throughout an empty space at the Temporary Stedelijk Museum, and had to produce an object that was mirrored and installed in a window. I felt sick about having to make an object – I only wanted it to be a tool. So I approached its production very rationally, adapting it to the architecture that already existed. I think objects are inferior to the situations they produce.



*AGL: I imagine your environmental shifts and tweaks bring an audience to a temporality of interruption, estrangement or discontinuous perception. This is a space of agency, perhaps, where aesthetic and the political meet by way of an irksome experience, or an evocation of autonomous or spontaneous action. How do you think politics are enacted through your work? For instance, your performance ‘Carry On’ (2013) featured actors who held positions that were subtly unexpected or troublesome throughout the crowded commercial space of Hoog Catharijne. Who is having their consciousness interrupted? And to what political or social ends?*

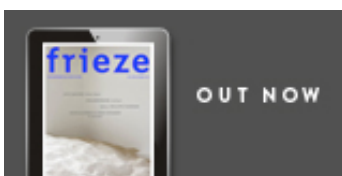
GK: In *Carry On* I wanted to produce images of relationships between people that a viewer might not understand, or be able to place, that would require the reformulation of experience. Public spaces are so encoded with what can and can't be done. Here, the gestures of the performers weren't dramatic or urgent, but rendered something in the balance of a crack, a crack in reality. The piece included couples that were physically carrying each other, or leaning on one another. They sat on shoulders, or were positioned in a sort of standing Pietà. I had a very mixed cast: a very tall man, a Congolese football player, a young, tiny blonde girl – so the different combinations of gestures and bodies changed the responses of the viewers and their level of alarm. It quickly became political without any intentionally political content.



The work was more about the public than the performers. It was so strange, a viewer would see one of these tableaux, keep walking past, and then consistently, about 20 metres later, they would turn around and make a confused face. This space is so important – it's a translation of some change in perception, materialized by the similarity in how long it took a viewer to turn and look after first seeing something odd. This delay in reaction was the performance.

I did a similar work about a decade ago, *Point of View*, where actors would enact mundane situations in public spaces, but they were artificial. Ten years ago, public space was much more open. European politics are moving increasingly to the right, motivated by fear, and I think we don't react so much as a public anymore. We've created a shield around ourselves, and we don't want to interact, or risk being in danger. To stand still in public is now much more provocative than to keep moving.

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