Screening Room no. 8 with Rosa Doornenbal: *The Will to Believe*

Giulia Shah
Hi, Rosa, so nice that you're joining us for the chat as part of your 11:11 Screening Rom screening. We'll be showing the trailer for your film "*The Will to Believe*", throughout December. Great to have you.

Rosa Doornenbal
Thank you so much for inviting me. Very excited to show the film, or the trailer on your website and for the interview.

Alex Bell
Hi, Rosa, thanks for coming.

Giulia Shah
We always start a bit like, general.. So maybe it would be nice if you can briefly introduce yourself and your practice.

Rosa Doornenbal
Yes, sure. Very big question. Of course, also, as it's general, but I'll just try. I'm Rosa. And I primarily work in the mediums of sculpture, video and performance. At this point, my work is mostly inspired by personal and collective ideas about desirability, morality and success, mostly in relation to the formation of gender and identity. Yeah, I guess I can probably tell more, according to the other questions.

Alex Bell
I guess maybe if we start talking about the film, maybe there will be a good point to learn more about your practice. So I guess it'd be great if you could talk a bit about how the work came into fruition? And how moving image in particular has come to play a big part in your practice?

Rosa Doornenbal

Yeah, I think these are slightly two different questions. But I'll start with the last one. Okay, the moving image, which I think has always kind of played a bit of a role in my practice. Often, when I made sculptures, they would end up in a video somehow. I think film sort of offers a bit of control about a situation that you can create, in how you see the work or a sculpture, that becomes a prop maybe, and I quite like that you can work with time, because that's the element of time that comes in when you work with video, which gives you the opportunity to create suspense or any sort of time related element. And yeah, the film that I'm going to be showing the trailer of at your website, that has been a very long process. But very exciting as well. It basically all started during lockdown when I was in Amsterdam. And I actually, just before that, I wanted to start working with people on a new performance piece. I was really interested in magic at that moment. So I was researching a little bit about that. But then suddenly, I found myself in Amsterdam, I hadn't even told the people I wanted to work with that I wanted to work with them. But I basically started to make a puppet of one of these people, a good friend of mine, Norman. And it was a little bit creepy in some way. But then I also thought it was quite loving. I just started by drawing his face from pictures. And I mean, the first puppet I made was quite basic. And I developed it more after that first one. But yeah, when I was back in, in London, I started to work a lot more on the set and develop the storyline slowly, slowly, although this came in quite late, I was kind of mostly developing the characters through developing its habitat and its character and just... I was reading a lot more into puppetry and magic as well, which really inspired me, I was watching loads of films as well. And I think all of these things just slowly started to feed into the work. At the same time I met up online, it was still sort of COVID times with a magician, which was really interesting: Jack Paon. Who could tell me a lot more about the history of magic and who gave me lots of references, and also helped me to develop a few tricks that could be used in the film. I think all this time. I still had it in my mind both as a performance as well as a film. But then at a certain point I was like okay, let's now just make it into a film. Let's focus on that first. Because it was still lockdown it just seemed like a better way to move forward.

Giulia Shah
I can really imagine it as a performance.

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, yeah, it's gonna come, it's gonna come

Giulia Shah
There are lots of things you spoke about that I think we will probably get into more depth, like this really interesting relation between performance and film and this idea of time as control of the sculptures. But I was just curious because we spoke a lot throughout the production time, we had been in touch and I knew it was like quite a big, big production, but also a shift in how you work with people on a project like that. So I was curious to know a bit about the process of the production and like casting actors and storyboarding, and how it was to work with–I imagined–like a bigger group of people to produce a work.

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, so the first version I made was only of act one, which I showed in a group show. And I was doing everything by myself. I mean, except for the music, actually. But all the filming, I mean, the production of the sets. It was kind of madness, to be honest, because basically I had to press play on the record button on my phone, I was using my phone. And then I had to play the soundtrack of the voice, so I had guidance for the puppet to move its mouth, because it can talk. And then I had to walk to the other side of the set and control the puppet. But I couldn't really see how it looked on the film, I had a mirror, but I mean, it was just like, very D.I.Y. I knew it wouldn't stop at act one, I just could only do act one within that time. But I already had ideas of act two and act three. And then luckily, I had some access to more funding. So I decided to work with more people and to incorporate a bigger team, which really brought the whole film to a whole other level, I think. And it was amazing to work with others. I worked with a D.O.P, who I first got in just to do the lights but then in the end, he could also do the camera work, which was amazing. And I worked with a puppeteer Millie Wise the D.O.P is Thomas Caminada. And also with somebody who did the

soundtrack, two people actually, Natalie Kynigopoulou and Sven van Nimwegen, and it was just really mind blowing, how they could lift the work to another place. But then also, it was quite challenging to be working with so many people because I had to do both the production side of things and organizing everything, as well as... I was still developing the work in a way because it was only Thomas the D.O.P who asked me for a script. And the only thing I had were a few like drawings. And I was like, that's enough. But he kind of forced me to–I mean, he didn't force me–but he asked me to create a script for the film. And doing that really made me realize it's a very good guidance during filming and editing. So yeah, it's really pushed the way I work as well, so much more. Which was helpful.

Alex Bell
And we did actually want to ask you a little bit about the script and the kind of importance that it played in the film. But also the importance that language and writing holds in your work kind of at large. And those two things working together.

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, so the whole script is basically taken from different films, books, TV shows, I barely came up with anything myself. That's why all the films I was watching during the whole process form a big part of the work because I was basically screenshotting a lot whenever there was a text that I thought would work well. Or it wasn't even like that concise yet in how I was collecting it. But afterwards, I just went through all of it. And I kind of formulated a script. And I think all of these things, like all of the actual references, all play into the work at another level as well, which I like. And I think it's also because maybe I have a hard time with writing my own stuff. I find it very cringe very quickly. And I think maybe if it's taken from something else, I quite like it when it could be a bit kitsch or over the top. I just don't have this ability to judge my own writing so well. I think that's very difficult. But when you take it from somewhere else and you put it in a new context, you can also work with shifting the meaning of it.

Giulia Shah

I find that really interesting, that sort of appropriation of language from like, maybe mainstream media as well?

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah. So it's a combination of like, niche art films or books and also really mainstream like Marvel Universe or matrix, you know

Giulia Shah
you really sense that though in the film I find I didn't actually know this, but now it's like, that makes like a lot of sense

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, suddenly people are like "I thought, I recognize that sentence".

Giulia Shah
I find the trailer quite epic. I don't know if that's like the right word to use. But it feels very much just like Hollywood. Like the suspense and I get the feeling that like, you know, Victor is having this kind of existential crisis. And he'll have, like... as I'm watching the trailer. I'm like, I need to watch this film, because he'll have some kind of breakthrough or his life will fall apart. So it feels like a Hollywood drama or also a bit of a Disney-esque kind of feel.

Alex Bell
It's the magic.

Giulia Shah
Yeah, the magic or like Alice in Wonderland and the sexy rabbit and like... So yeah, you've already spoken about that cinema played an influence throughout the process of the making of the film but are there any, like specific movies that you could maybe talk about a bit that you were watching throughout?

Rosa Doornenbal
Yes, totally. I mean, I think in general, I think it's quite strange maybe to make a trailer for an art film. But maybe the film is already a little bit in between cinema and moving image. And I think it fitted quite well with his character. I mean, he is a magician with this illusion of grandeur. That he gets this epic trailer as well. But then it was quite hard to funnel down what are the most important storylines within the film, I guess I said, Oh, my God, actually, quite a lot is happening as well. But yeah, it's also trying to kind of create a feeling for what the film is going to be in some way. I was looking a lot at Hollywood trailers as well. And then usually there's this like, voice over like ... "this is gonna happen", which I could use the rabbit's voice for a little bit because she is a bit this like, unreliable narrator, like she's sexy, but she's also a bit cheeky. An inspiration for her was kind of a trickster figure and you never really know what they say if it's like true or not. Or how do you read that? So yeah, a direct in influence for her was also "*Who Framed Roger Rabbi*t". Also the combination of animation and real film, then there's "*Birdman*" was a very big influence for Victor, like his sort of like masculine fragility and trying to make it again in the theater world. Fellini films, "*Valley of the Dolls*". I really love any film that is about theater or is about film. There's a really beautiful film "*The Jester*" . Sorry, I don't know any names of directors. I am very bad with that. But you can look it up.

Giulia Shah
There's definitely a Fellini vibe to certain things, I think. Victor, the character feels like could be like a Fellini character.

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah. One of these machos.

Giulia Shah
Yeah macho but also the magic but trickster-esque ellement.

Rosa Doornenbal
But also maybe the crisis?

Giulia Shah
Well, that definitely, yeah. Always an existential crisis.

Alex Bell
I wanted to ask–because I really love all the characters in the film for the different aspects of their personality you could say, sexy rabbit is perfect. And the Witch and Victor as well–And I was, I don't know if you want to say anything about this, but it's Victor like based on anyone real?

Rosa Doornenbal
So he basically started as being based on this friend of mine like his facial features, mostly. But then also quite soon he sort of lifted off from that and became its own personality. Yeah, Birdman was a bit of an influence on his character, but also I was.... because he's this like kind of cocky magician type of figure, I was also interested in how magicians are slightly annoying as well, because they give this idea that they're in control of the whole thing and the fact that they always chop women in half and saw through female body parts. So his bedroom is kind of based on Hugh Hefner's bedroom. I was also reading this book: Pornotopia by Paul B. Preciado**,** and this James Bond type of masculinity, which is really quite, they like their design, but they're still kind of completely macho as well. But then at the same time, I also wanted to show his vulnerability, because I thought that was important as well to bring in some masculine form of vulnerability. So that's why I think the Birdman was kind of trying to take him down again, as a macho man.

Alex Bell
And what was it like working with a puppet, not an actor, and this kind of object

Rosa Doornenbal
That was amazing. So good. I mean, especially when I started to work with Millie, the puppeteer, who was just amazing at bringing him to life. Millie would come up with a few things, and it was like seeing Victor do that, we

were saying this has to be the film. Victor was real. We would sometimes react to him sitting in bed like, "Oh, my God, look at him. He's so cute. He's so pathetic".

Alex Bell
I love his hair.

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, that's a wig. It took a really long time to work on the hair. Yeah. I love it

Giulia Shah
As we're all laughing, humour seems to play an important role in this work, but also all of your previous work that I've seen. Can you speak a bit about humour.

Rosa Doornenbal
It's true I often use humour in my work, I think it's just kind of a way to show power dynamics or slightly destabilise them. Especially if it's a topic that... sometimes if you address it straight on, it becomes a bit kitsch, or it's hard to be sensitive to something. And I think with humour, you can sort of… it's like a detour to still addressing something. But then I think it's also... the difficulty that it becomes too cynical. I don't like that. Or sarcastic even. I find that also quite difficult. So I think it's also important to still have a sincerity to it. Yeah. So it's a bit of a fine line. But, I like using humour or absurdity to kind of go a bit beyond the expected sometimes. I don't know, that's maybe a big statement. I don't know if I really go beyond the expected.

Giulia Shah
But it can also just be an intuitive thing. Like, yeah, you are a funny person. But it feels like it's also a tool. I think it's an important tool.

Rosa Doornenbal
Exactly. I use it really mainly as a tool to address things.

Giulia Shah
Yeah, I think also talking about addressing things. It feels like it's definitely like a comment on contemporary society in this film, but also like your work in general. Can you maybe speak a little bit about Victor, and his existential crisis and maybe some other issues or societal issues that you speak about in quite a humorous way in this film?

Rosa Doornenbal
Yes, I think, well, it was born during lockdown, which I think is probably a big part of it as well. Like, I think many people went through a bit of an existential moment. They're like questioning themselves and what they do and I mean, it was very strange time. Of course, like in the beginning, we didn't even know what to think, what to believe, what to understand of what was happening. So you're trying to make sense of all of that. You're, you're basically dependent on all these news outlets, whilst at the same time, or governmental websites or whatever. At the same time, the idea of alternative facts, post truth started to arise. So it was very strange to navigate all of that as well. I mean, it was also feeding loads of conspiracy theories at the time. Whilst at the same time, I think the film is also about how you create, it's like on a personal level, how you make sense of the world, but also how you create hope and expectations and an idea of who you are. And also how this is fed by the mediums you consume as well, and how this creates some idea of selfhood, and within a capitalist society as well, at the same time, so yeah, it's this idea of trying to be well, or wellbeing, whilst at the same time you're being fed all this like, I don't know... This myth of how you should be doing that. I think maybe also the rise of social media has a big influence on that as well.

Alex Bell
I also think you touched upon like, kind of celebrity and falling in and out of fame or not famous. Being seen. And that feeds into it. Yeah, the rise of social media as well. And the idea that anyone could be successful.

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, this idea that it's all about success. And what is this success that is projected onto us or that we project. It's a projected idea of success, I think that we all fall into as a trap, in some way. And it's hard to avoid. And I think Victor is definitely very much influenced by that. I mean, I guess also as a puppet, a puppet is also about control. Or being in control or not always, especially when you see the string. So you see that it's like an outer force, which is manipulating it. So yeah, that's kind of reflecting also this other part of how we are being controlled by all of these projected ideas of success, fame, hopes, dreams.

Giulia Shah
But it's also interesting now you're speaking about that, because Victor is being projected to that, but he's also projecting that so he's like, he's this ambiguous character that kind of shows both those sides, I guess.

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, I think this is the continuous question in a way. It's like, Is it him? Or is it what is being fed to him? Or? Yeah, like, where does it stop? And where does it start as well?

Alex Bell
Well, I guess it's also I kind of, what do you think? What's your goal for the audience? Do you have an idea of what you want them to take away? Is it like this kind of self reflection of am I like the one in control of myself or not?

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, I usually don't start a work with thinking about what the audience should take away from it. But yeah, I'd hope that they in some way maybe see reflection of themselves as well a little bit or about what is happening in society at large in some way. But I think it's also quite a ride the film so I can understand people take different things from it. And there's, there are a few different layers to it as well.

Alex Bell
Do you have that same approach to kind of your expectation or ideas of an audience when you're doing performance work?

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, it's not like I don't take the audience into consideration at all when making a film or something. But of course, with performance, it's a more direct exchange. And maybe, I mean, I do think about the experience overall. It is like what I said before about the element of time and suspense. I really like how you can manipulate these things in a film, together with a soundtrack and lights or any theatrical element I love to bring in also as a form of manipulation.

Giulia Shah
I had a question about the role that you yourself and your body plays in your work. I mean, you play a role in this particular film. And of course, when you're performing, you are often the performer. And I feel like you always played like a role in your, in your work, or your body does. And I'm wondering if you would say that some of your work could be autobiographical? If there's an element of that, or why it's important to use yourself where you're embodying your work?

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, I think there's definitely an autobiographical element in many of the works. But I also think it's very important that it transcends any personal sort of connotation. And I think often, when I use my own body in my work, it's also because of the lack of funding or infrastructure, especially with performance or film like. It's a whole different deal to work with another body. I think having access to funding makes me able to think bigger in that sense. But I think in this film, in particularly, I play the role of the witch so to say, and I think her power relationship with Victor is quite significant. So I think in this instance, it's quite crucial that it's me.

Giulia Shah
Yeah, I think that's like a bit what kind of what we wanted to speak about with you about the film. I also just curious to know what you've got coming

up next, we know that you're moving away from London back to the Netherlands, do you think that we will have an influence on your work? Or do you have anything coming up that we can get exited about?

Rosa Doornenbal
So yes, I'm moving to the Netherlands very soon, within a month. I'm excited about that. But also, I took this opportunity to organize an evening of performances, as a semi leaving do or just an opportunity. So I'm mostly very excited about that at the moment. I have asked a few people I know. And I think it's going to be a very nice evening of many interesting performances happening. It's a bit of a big project, becoming a bit of a big project. But it's very nice and exciting as well. And I will be trying something that is related to The Will to Believe performance. Yes. So that's going to be interesting. And then after I move to the Netherlands, yeah, I think I have to start a little bit from scratch in some way. I have to find a studio, find a job. Luckily, I know some people there already. So I hope this will help. And next summer, I have a residency planned for where I'll be working on the performance. Yeah. It's going to be called "**The Will to Believe on stage. Will we Believe?**"

Giulia Shah
Ooooh, very excited.

Rosa Doornenbal
So The Will to Believe becomes a little bit of an umbrella for a few different works.

Giulia Shah
That's really exciting.

Rosa Doornenbal
Yeah, I will be working with Norman finally, who the puppet is based on and the rabbit hopefully.

Alex Bell

There's lots of layers. So there's lots of things that can continue unravelling.

Rosa Doornenbal
I think so. Yeah.

Giulia Shah
We'll hope to be there for that. Yeah, that's really exciting. Cool. Well, thanks so much for speaking to us. And showing your trailer.

Alex Bell
Can't wait to see the full film when it's allowed to be released into the world.

Giulia Shah
Yes, thank you so much for all the questions. It was very nice to rethink this project and what it was about. Very nice and interesting.