

Meeting  
Benjamin  
Verdonck

# Just Don't Do It

Place

Kapellen,  
near Antwerp

Date

14 May 2018

Distance

70 km  
(one way)

Travel time

bicycle: 10 min  
train: 1h  
(one way)

CO<sub>2</sub> emitted

1,5 kg  
(one way)

Meeting time

5h

Organization  
time for this

journey  
10 min

Dear Benjamin,

How time has flown since we met. It was so easy. To hop on the train to Kapellen: just an hour of reading, writing, watching, relaxing. And then to find you on your way home (you came to pick me up at the station, but we missed each other on the platform, so we arrived at almost the same time in your garden with our bicycles). In the kitchen, with a cup of coffee, we chat as if we've known each other forever. Which obviously isn't the case. After fifteen minutes, we seem to have said all there is to say. By now we know everything we already knew. The conversation can begin for real.

Still, sitting there in Kapellen, it feels like coming home. Even though we met for the first time a month or two earlier, after a performance of *Song for Gigi* at Kaaistudio's, in Brussels. A few years before that, I saw *Misschien wisten zij alles*, with you and Willy Thomas and a text by Toon Tellegen, at the KVS, also in Brussels (the 'caaaaake with nuts nuts' stuck around for quite a while after the performance, as if you had stayed for months with us at our table). I read two of your books. And – this I mustn't forget of course – I passed by your bird's nest glued to the façade of the Anspach Centre in

Brussels quite by accident. Also, I saw a house in a tree in the Vogelenzangpark in Ghent, and I saw you as a giant in the *Hart boven Hard* parades, from Brussels to Ostend.

That's where I have to look for that feeling of coming home: in the proximity, in the familiar, in the coincidence of all these different encounters. It's easy to meet people in a small country like ours. It's easy to travel to you, even after you moved from the city to the countryside. It's even easy to meet à l'improviste, so to speak, like when you texted me the other day to invite me to *One More Thing*, at the Luchtbal in Antwerp, the city where I lived for many years. I caught the train and joined you. You treated me to a performance in an apartment. Can it be more homely?

Maybe this feeling of coming home has something to do with you moving to Kapellen, away from Antwerp, the city where you've always lived. You found a house there, big enough to share with four families, with a big garden where everybody feels comfortable. The weather is nice, the door is open, we talk at the kitchen table, eat in the garden with your daughter and the daughter of one of the neighbours – they go to the same school in practically the same garden. That we can speak Dutch – now that this Grand Tour is nearing its end – makes it even easier. That we're both vegetarians and that we do these little personal things that, we're convinced, are good for our environment, brings us even closer together. Even our folding bikes are the

same brand, and almost the same colour. I know from reading your book that you travel as much as possible by train, as I tried to do during my Grand Tour. In your *Manifesto for the Active Participation of the Performing Arts Sector in the Transition towards a Fair Durability* you urge people, among other things, not to travel by plane.

What, then, do we do when we meet up? We share travel stories! To me, this way of travelling has a lot to do with pleasure. A pleasure that I also want to share with others. For you, it's different, because you feel, to a greater extent than I do, that you're more part of a political body. Maybe this has something to do with your position as a public figure. It certainly has something to do with your position as an engaged citizen. We're the ones who choose our politicians. And we're the ones who live the way we want to live. So much to say that we can't blame politicians for everything. It's not because they accept a great responsibility that we've been absolved of any and every responsibility. We're part of a collective and moral responsibility. That's how you see it. You understand me when I say that ecology is a luxury. Your budget at Toneelhuis permits you to state your demands and to travel as you see fit. That the organizers need to include the travel arrangements of the technicians, that's part of the deal. An artist starting out doesn't have quite so much choice. Your position at Toneelhuis is your luxury. It keeps everything together. This doesn't mean that the solution fundamentally needs to come from the

politicians. Then we talk about the proximity of politics. About the question: where is politics? The people who make decisions at climate change conferences are Indian, Chinese and American politicians that we didn't elect. That makes it complicated to explain to the Indian politician how pleasant it is to ride a bicycle.

You reference a new kind of sensitivity in the field of the visual arts in Flanders. Your *Manifesto* evolved in that environment. There again, you play your role as a public figure. Pushing this moral responsibility, you can contribute to an environment that impacts both policy and politics. The basis widens. The critical mass grows. You learn from your experience as a vegetarian. (*At home, you and your whole family stopped eating meat after seeing a movie with Brigitte Bardot. You were still at the Jesuit College in Antwerp then. That was something. On the school trip to Rome, you and the other vegetarian in your class, the guy with the dreads, ate nothing but eggs.*) An exception thirty years ago, vegetarian options are now a fixture of every menu. That is a shift. That is a change in public opinion that you may have contributed to, at least a little bit.

My only fear is that this shift has been too slow and that the critical mass is still too small. On the one hand, you have those who have too much and give nothing; on the other, you have those who have too little and want more. In between there is this tiny middle class able to afford considering the environment and ecological balance. But the vast

majority rallies behind political parties that push for fewer taxes and less political interference. And this when we need exactly the opposite: more taxes on kerosene and petrol, more interference on the part of state concerning the railroads as a public good and basic need.

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Our bold approach leads us too easily to the great themes. We change directions. We look for detours. Beating around the bush in order to eventually fall in it again. You tell me about reading Bruno Latour's *Facing Gaia*. To Latour, the damage is already done: we knew the damage was coming, and how, but we didn't do anything to prevent it. And yet there is this strange kind of ... I wouldn't say hope exactly, but fear, fear as an engine of change. The situation isn't bad enough yet. You'll only win an election with climate change when the situation is entirely out of hand. This is why Latour looks for salvation in politics, through the detour of art. He turns to theatre, and he organizes, with Philippe Quesne, a parliament that doesn't represent nations only, but also woods and rivers.

You love this. Just like Lotte and her Parliament of Things. Just like with post-humanism: the human being is no longer the centre of all things. What you thought impossible ten years ago is now commonplace. This is how you end up with a radical push for a practice of a moral responsibility

that goes beyond the individual and advocates for a common choice. Or rather: for you it isn't a choice but a common duty.

In these moments, I admire your incisiveness. Personally, I still don't get beyond my own pleasure. I can't say to someone else what he or she must do. I'm not saying that you do. And yet, you tackle my position by referencing the terror threat. The fact that everyone thinks it's normal that people have to go about with an uncovered face, that people have to cooperate with passport controls, that people have to allow their bags to be checked. This is part of the joint responsibility. Because the community has to be protected. But when we talk about ecology? Then it's about individual choice, and everyone is a free person, free to do as he or she likes.

What's important to you is how not to do certain things. To make a difference by not taking action. The collective decision to stop eating meat, for example. This – which is also an action of course, be it a negative one – would have a huge effect if undertaken on a huge scale. (*On my way to the station, I come across a sign in the garden of one of the citizens of your new municipality that says: Gewoon doen – Just do it. This is the slogan with which Flemish neo-liberals go to the elections. And I wonder: how could we change this to Gewoon niet doen – Just don't do it?*) The problem, of course, is how to explain this to the Indian politician (*who's got to be happy with his daily piece of tofu*) at the next climate change conference. Maybe we do need a Marshall Plan,

as in Latour's book. What happened as a result of that plan in the first couple of years after WWII is also possible today. From time to time, you need someone who sharpens your viewpoint. As you did with your *Manifesto*. Just don't do it! Then see what it means, we notice that it goes back again to individual responsibility. As at Toneelhuis, where you yourself bring up your *Manifesto* during the monthly artistic meeting. Then your director says that people must decide these things for themselves. That he can't explain to his technicians that they can't eat meat anymore. And, at the same time, everybody's speaking about super diversity. In 2020, white people will be a minority in Antwerp. And, suddenly, the acceptance of this super diversity is seen as a collective responsibility. You can't understand this. Ecological mutation is *also* a collective responsibility – maybe less tangible, less visible – but that doesn't absolve us from having to do something about it.

It's exactly this intangibility, this limited visibility, that pushes a philosopher like Latour towards the arts. In *Facing Gaia*, he even takes it to a next level: he ends with religion. If you can't see it, you'll have to believe it. And maybe it's true, Benjamin, that all these small things that you and I do for ourselves contain a religious dimension. All these individual actions, they're like buying indulgences. That's how we handle our guilt. *Moral germophobia* your wife calls it. And your insistence on strict adherence to that *moral germophobia* threatens to be

paralyzing. *Just don't do it*. It's also political.

(You say something about Jonathan Safran Foer, who says, in *Eating Animals*, that you're better off being radical. Foer ends with a story about his Jewish grandmother, who's adrift during the War. A Russian farmer gives her a piece of pork, which she eventually throws away. 'If you don't have any principles, what's life worth living for?', she asks.)

Sometimes – along with Peter Tom Jones and Vicky De Meyere, who, by the way, have this to say in *Terra Reversa*: 'Ecology isn't a luxury problem – read: "to do something for the environment" – but a question of safeguarding our livelihood' – you hope, as they also do, that a mild crisis will emerge out of which new alternatives will manifest themselves. Like your student, who wants to go to Athens because everything is possible there, just because there is no money, no food. What there is in Athens, however, is a great sense of solidarity. The elimination of one capital ensures the creation of a new creative capital. Or like your own experience with survival artists in Kinshasa. They know how to do business, and that's where you feel really vulnerable. You need new stories. Little stories that start with the individual and move towards the collective.

That's what I like so much about *Song for Gigi*. It's a fragmented performance. It starts with the mysterious object you work with, showing an ongoing sequence of frames within frames. That is how I like to look at these little stories that click in and out of each other. These frames, I look at them as I

look at a head. That is how people think: all these little stories that end up in the mix. That's how we move through the world: from one sensation to another. And you meet someone, and you start talking about something, and you continue discussing something totally different, and you try to inscribe this in what came before and will come after. Then I think about your story about the climate march in Ostend during COP21 in Paris, about how you went from there to the Jungle in Calais. That's ecology. Everything happens in the same world, in the same head. All these little snippets, sooner or later, have something to do with each other. It's got to do with care. With cherishing what is other. Ecology is a social behaviour. In your work, you don't advocate for cardboard scenery and energy-saving bulbs. You develop a social practice.

In fact, since you've moved, you've experienced the same thing through your change of environment. (*Can you call that, too, a mild crisis?*) You live far away now from exhibitions, and from the coffee shops you frequented downtown. At your new place, you develop instead an affection for the plants that you see growing. In the morning, you're stunned when you notice all the other things that live in your garden. There is more on this planet than people. You experience another ecology. An ecology of time maybe. You try to handle your time more thoroughly. You create openings towards a new social life. You get detached from the production logic, from the artistic treadmill in which you

circulate for years. You live at a critical distance now.

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Before I came to you, I thought that we had to talk about the symbolic. In the course of our conversation, however, it became clear that the symbolic can't be separated from the political. You search for symbolic places to show your work: the Permeke Library in Antwerp, the Place Bara or the Anspach Centre in Brussels, the Vogelenzangpark in Ghent. In these places, your symbolism becomes political. Politics deals with ecology, with refugees, with very specific projects, like the newly developed **Oosterweel connection in Antwerp**. All of this is connected. And increasingly so. I recall your presence as the giant during the marches of *Hart boven Hard*. And I wonder: how long can you keep this up? Even *Hart boven Hard* threatens to become a tradition, a piece of folklore, something symbolic. You present yourself as a citizen, but you keep working as an artist who insists on creating stories that address people. Like Jean-Luc Godard (*or Thomas Hirschhorn*), you don't want to make political art: you want to make art in a political way. Rather than screaming slogans, you search for enigmatic images that help you to relate to reality and from there – like Godard and Hirschhorn – you search for the confrontation.

Or like Beuys, an artist who comes up almost everywhere I go on my Grand Tour. For one of your first actions, *I Like America and America Likes Me*,

you lived for three days in a cage with a pig. The action was inspired by Beuys, who lived for three days with a coyote. Like Beuys, who was also reflecting on his troubled relationship with the US and its politics, your action was a reaction to Bush's famous words leading up to the Iraq War: 'You are either with us or against us'. In your conversation with the pig, you play in a space that isn't touched by this polarization. This is what you look for in art: to pierce this reality that we perceive as a certainty. That is how you understand Beuys' dictum that *every man is an artist*: it's about the potential in any one of us.

You refuse to pick a side, to create a situation where you have to choose between yes and no. You search for a third, temporary, precarious space. This brings us close to the moments where you reach the limitations of your adherence to the strictness of your *moral germophobia*. Like those cultural institutions that won't sell Coca-Cola, but keep on using oil from American multinationals to heat their buildings. Symbolism instead of politics. Sometimes, this refusal to choose sides has something naïve about it. As do the stories of Tellegen, with which you like to work: behind the sugary hides a harsh reality. Like Tellegen, you develop a personal vocabulary in between symbolism and politics.

That is why I think it's significant that one of your first actions is a conversation with a pig. It fits in a series of political actions about squatters, the social movement in Antwerp, or bicycle occupations. Here, too, you can find this polarization, this

polemic – between car drivers and cyclists, for example. And there, in between the turmoil, you set up your theatre and start playing. But with the pig, you step out of the shadows. This was your first solo action. In that piece, you demand your place in a tradition of social art that's still present in ecological art. Beuys remains the big example. (*Not only for you, by the way. In Lyon, I met Thierry Boutonnier, who has conversations with animals too – as well as with plants and machines – on his parents' farm. This inter-species communication seems important to me. There is where ecological thinking starts: with the respect for your environment. And respect, that starts with communication, with dialogue.*)

You don't like to preach to the same choir. You keep searching for a new audience. When you've been in the theatre world too long, you want to break out again, to find a place in the crowd; when you're in the crowd too long, you move to nature. City-marketing, the Zomer van Antwerpen, Boulevardtheater: that kind of spectacle isn't your cup of tea. Instead, you make these little boxes to work with. You can take them to the people, as with *One More Thing*, at Luchtbal, which takes place in an apartment, and features a musician from an apartment nearby. That's how you travel, not just around your city, but also around the world. (*In the meantime, however, you dream out loud to tour for a year across all the different nationalities in your city.*)

*Besoin* and *envie*, or *need* and *desire*: these, you say, are the conditions in which art grows. You need

54 them both. Art grows in a subset that occurs between both. To connect necessity to pleasure. That is also how I see my place in ecology. Between need and desire. Between the collective and the individual. The one can't exist without the other. No individual without social interaction. Then it makes you happy when there are fifteen giggling WhatsApping girls in your performance at Luchtbal. It's also one of the reasons why you create these little objects. You can use them on different occasions: from the opening of Theaterfestival to the training weekend for *Hart boven Hard* to the inhabitants of the social housing blocks at Luchtbal. It's all part of an interest that puts you in the middle of things.

This is also why you like to teach. You want to give something back, much as people like Johan Simons, who found the time to teach you when you were at the conservatory. For six months, you set up your workshop at a primary school for *Friedman's Pencil*. You want to invest in the new generation that will have to make the pencil. Art doesn't always have to take place in an institutionalized space. It's part of a battle. A battle with yourself, with your position in the theatre world, with the fact that you don't want to be judged by the same people, who will time and again tell you that you're doing things right. Instead, you also want to make things that no one sees, or that someone does see, but without you knowing it. (*A little house behind an advertising panel where junkies go to shoot up, where furniture was constantly being smashed, and where*

*you went regularly for a year to take care of the place, and its furniture.*) Or your mother: what would she think if she would come to look at your work?

*Friedman's Pencil* is your world economy class. It's about raw materials, politics, geography, history, the free market. To have to explain this to those kids forces you to rethink certain things as you and your students embark on a journey together, not knowing where you'll end up. The idea was to disassemble the pencil and take all the raw materials back to their origin. This effort resulted in an installation in which the various elements were explained to the audience of teachers, parents and students.

55 Things are important to you. Not only the pencil and its raw materials. That's where it ends. It starts with what you find on the way. Little rings, twigs, rubbish. You hoard them until they create a story. About trash, about consumption, about value, about recycling. *Envie* and *besoin*: you start from the desire, and you design a theoretical frame with it. It starts with the love of looking at things. Your inventory grows into a diary of moments that fall through the cracks: discarded, consumed, recycled, worthless moments. In this way, things find their place. As with that coal you took back to the mine. It contains a beautiful story. About coal, CO<sub>2</sub> pollution, lignite-fuelled power stations. The only thing you can do with it is to stick it back where it came from. To give it a resting place. This seems better than shouting, 'Close the plant!', in front of the lignite-fuelled power plant. Against polariza-

tion: *yeahyeahyeah, nonono*.

It makes me think of a passage from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse V*, which I keep recycling whenever and wherever the occasion allows:

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. (...) When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.

The (im)possibility of handling things in Vonnegut, his care and his reconciliation too: that is what your work's about. As if you lived in a world turned upside down.

Take care,

Pieter

# Sad is Happy for Deep People

After our first meeting, I sent her a quote from Doctor Who: 'Sad is happy for deep people'. I don't watch the British television series myself, but I found the quote in a book on ecology and beauty, and those are the subjects that come back time and again in our conversation. 'Beauty', Timothy Morton says in *Being Ecological*, 'is sad like that. Sadness means there is something you can't quite put your finger on. You can't quite grasp it'. Being ecological works the same way: you can't quite put your finger on it. You can't quite grasp it. It appears in between, and the moment you make it explicit, it tends to fade away. Therefore, Morton goes on, 'the ecological society to come (...) must be a bit haphazard, broken, lame, twisted, ironic, silly, sad'. I had to think of the Doctor Who quote when she told me over lunch that people don't understand that a happy person like her can make such sad art. I think I can understand it.

Before we met, she sent me a link to two videos and to her website. Going through the material I got a feeling of being disconnected (the two videos)

**Meeting**  
**Tamara**  
**Bilankov**

Place  
Zagreb

Date  
7–8 May  
2018

Distance  
1300 km  
(one way)

Travel time  
bicycle: 10 min  
train: 17h  
(one way)

CO<sub>2</sub> emitted  
39,7 kg  
(one way)

Meeting time  
5h

Organization  
time for this  
journey  
2h