

WELCOME STRANGER - A little history

marianna van der zwaag

"While walking along the Ten Katemarkt you might suddenly hear a somewhat strange sound from the Hasebroekstraat. That is, in fact, artist Simon Wald-Lasowski's turkey. Like a true cuckoo, the animal appears every half hour. Much to the delight of the neighborhood. 'These are the little things that make life fun,' says the neighbor across the street. Simon was asked to participate in a project where artists create art on the facade of their own homes."

In recent years, Welcome Stranger organized a series of temporary art interventions on the streets of Amsterdam. Artists were invited to make new work for on, above, or with their own homes. In doing so, they worked in the unexplored area between personal and public space. The above fragment from an AT5 broadcast describes the cuckoo clock that Simon Wald-Lasowski made of his house. Every half hour, a plump turkey emerged from the attic window which, arriving at the farthest point, rolled out a long tongue and let out a creaky scream. The technically ingenious artwork was like a playful, hallucinatory glitch. Similarly disruptive was the air conditioner Minne Kersten hung on her house which blew smoke rings into the street; or the red wire fencing that Lucas Lenglet mounted in front of all the windows of his corner-facing house, turning his home into a cage. Some contributions went further: Smàri Robertsson developed three new performances, which he enacted from his window during the three months his work was commissioned. Radna Rumping presented a radio show from her living room as a companion piece to her self-guided neighborhood walk with audio essay. Invisible to the listener, she dipped into her built-in closet where she keeps her record collection, from which she played Donald Byrd's song *Stepping into tomorrow*. In these ways, Welcome Stranger meandered through Amsterdam for the past two years, claiming public space in an unassuming way. Passersby became chance visitors or sharers, and places that people might have walked by for years were magically seen with different eyes.

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In the 1990s, Welcome Stranger began as a series of quirky projects organized by art critic and curator Marjolein Schaap and artist Ken Zeph. They invited artists to make visual work in front of the house they occupied on Stadhouderskade. They organized four projects in the context of the socio-political reality of the time, characterized by the opposing factors of hyper-individualism and the expansion of the public sphere. In the first edition, the house was emptied, but the signs of the absent private life were left available for artistic interventions. The house became an uncanny setting where the artists could experiment with individuality and identity while notions of ownership and privacy were temporarily suspended. Later, when the organizers returned, the rooms were not as they had been. The scratch of a nail revealed an underlying mural on the freshly whitewashed walls. Anything was allowed, and so it happened: walls painted with coffee grounds, a piece of the floor and ceiling cut out to create a recessed seating area, and for a short time, an iguana lived in the former bedroom. The emphasis of this and later projects was on collaboration. In the process, sometimes substantial disagreements arose, but friendships also grew. Exhibitions unfolded that were often more atmospheric in nature and alienating. At a certain point, the initiators felt that all the possibilities of the house and the Welcome Stranger concept had been exhausted and closed the project. Only for the time being, it turned out, because new editions followed in other locations, and a foundation with the same name was established.

My own encounter with Welcome Stranger began in a schoolyard in Amsterdam West in 2017 where art historian and researcher Hester Elzerman told me about her involvement with it while we waited to pick up our children. We decided to revive the dormant foundation, a revival inspired by the need for such experiments in times when polarization is rampant, fear-mongering online spins unchecked, and the much-celebrated Dutch tolerance often appears to stop at one's own front door. Realizing that the words "Welcome Stranger" might conjure up friendlier associations in this day and age, we drew inspiration from the idiosyncratic, autonomous working methods of our predecessors and went in search of what this history might offer us.

Welcome Stranger is at once simple and unexpectedly radical in how it involves both spectator and work of art. A meaningful encounter with art takes place within an intimate situation where the strange becomes familiar and the known becomes strange. We have become so accustomed to the institutionalization of the arts that its mere presentation in the

most personal place, a home, evokes feelings because of its vulnerable openness. The working methods of museums and art institutions are founded on production and continuity, and therefore often remain somewhat inward-looking and inflexible. Their infrastructures no longer suit changing circumstances, because what is happening in the world outside the museum – growing social inequality, a warming planet, the resulting global disruption and migrations – are forcing us to change. Moreover, the online world, with its echo chambers and bubbles, creates divisions that are increasingly difficult to bridge. As early as 1961 Marcel Duchamp said "*the great artist of tomorrow will go underground*". Increasingly you see artists abandoning the established institutions and commercial art world and seeking other ways to show their work and make contact with an audience. For example, they are choosing to stop making objects in a world that is already far too full of them, or abandoning a personal signature by working in collectives. Welcome Stranger is similarly aligned.

Welcome Stranger also reflects an idea that American sociologist Richard Sennet pointed to in a 2016 Harvard lecture - the relationship between the interiors of homes and inner life, an outgrowth of the historical development of the home. Whereas at first it was a single room where people worked and lived together, gradually a division into rooms occurred, creating privacy and the possibility for reflection and recognition of an inner life. With the recent projects of Welcome Stranger, the boundary between inside and outside is softened: artists work from the intimacy of their own home, not that of the organizers. There, on the threshold, works of art make their way outside. In the process, thoughts, intangible and indefinite, arise, leave the house and enter the world. And just like conversations with strangers, at first, it's difficult to connect with them, but then something surprisingly breaks through. A new door is opened.

My involvement with Welcome Stranger also takes me back to my own childhood in the Frisian countryside. I grew up with parents who slowly but surely transformed their characteristic home, *It Lytse Slot*, into a public museum in which they displayed folk art and crafts which they had collected. Exhibition space and private quarters blended together and were sometimes indistinguishable. Perhaps this is what fires my own urge to want to break the cultivated separation between art and life. The modest possibilities offered by the home as a basis for interventions feels familiar. From there, being genuinely receptive to the unknown is easier said than done. Welcome Stranger's future may be as unpredictable as its past.

Five new artworks by five artists will follow (in five locations) appearing in mid-May 2024, starting at the same time. Check the website www.welcomestranger.nl for more information and actual dates, and follow Welcome Stranger on Instagram: [_welcome stranger_](#)

About the author: Marianna van der Zwaag (1971) studied art history (MA) at the University of Amsterdam and has been revitalising Welcome Stranger since 2017. As curator there, she is concerned with making art emerge in unexpected places, in the middle of residential areas, and encouraging collaborations between artists. Marianna lives and works in Amsterdam, where she also works as curator at the Oude Kerk since 2017.

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