

BIOGRAPHY

OTHILIA VERDURMEN

I was born in Groningen, the Netherlands, in 1962. I grew up as the second daughter of a family with four children. I soon came into contact with textile because there was plenty of it lying about our house as a consequence of my father's profession. Even as a young girl I had a strong feeling for the material because I believed that anything made of textile could not be broken and because I wanted nothing more than to act out my imagination with various fabrics. My mother had a whole chest full of cloths made of all kinds of fibre. Even her wedding dress was in this chest and it was subjected to a snipping session for a theatre play.

Sometimes my father arrived home with a suitcase from which a minor wonder would emerge. Suddenly the floor was scattered with samples, colours and patterns. Then the stories began. Distant journeys, other cultures, exotic food. In this way, a piece of cloth became the fabric of a story. Full of excitement and expectation I would touch it, as if I myself were also in that other world. Occasionally I would find a small error in the soul of the fabric, in the embroidery, or perhaps a slight colour deviation in the pattern. Human hands had made it. That fired the imagination.

I attended grammar school where I first came into contact with mythology. This has remained a nutrient medium for my work, which has always been related to stories. I discovered the true significance of batik patterns, wajang, African masks, and art – Paul Klee, the Bauhaus and other art movements.

A route began to open up to me. In this period I saw the Triangel Figurentheater for the first time, a surrealistic puppet theatre presented by Henk Boerwinkel, which enjoyed worldwide acclaim.

This left a deep impression on me. After all, textile couldn't simply come to life spontaneously? I have never forgotten this performance, but it still took some time before I found my own way.

Because working with my heart, body and soul was of primary importance, I went to the Academie voor Expressie en Communicatie (AVEC) in Leeuwarden in 1981. I wanted to work with people. At the Academie I experimented with costumes, puppets, Commedia dell'Arte, masks, movement and theatre. Pina Bausch was one of the people who inspired me, and I visited her in

Wuppertal to study the effects of theatre in which personal motives are interwoven. After graduating, I contacted the Pop en Spel Kollektief (Puppet and Play Collective), a professional theatre company. Yvon Hofer educated me in the practical aspects of puppet-making. I made costumes, decors and play figures. I soon discovered that it was the image that told me the story. I looked at a figure through the eyes of an artist. This was a different way of looking at the qualities a puppet or a figure had to meet. Besides my work for the Collective, I began to make a series of large, mythological animal figures. In 1995 the Natuurmuseum Fryslân gave me the opportunity to create a large exhibition. That was the exhibition entitled *Nachtwereld* (Nightworld). Visitors entered into a constellation of passageways and travelled from night toward day. They left the bustle of the world behind them. A hybrid of visual art and theatre was thus generated, with visitors being transported by a story past various objects. A soundscape accompanied the project and there was dramatic lighting.

My love for textile remained, because it softens everything and is tangible. Sound is muffled, as in the womb.

Many projects followed in the same style: *The Snow Queen*, *Creep out of your Skin*, *The Dragon*, and *The Secret Garden*.

In broad terms, my work became increasingly abstract and dynamic. Structures arose associatively and grew together to form a composition. The composition was completed by the soundscape and the changing light, so that a cinematographic experience of the object became possible.

I began on the Phoenix project in 2006. After the fire in 2009, which destroyed my studio and the almost-completed work it contained, I decided to rebuild the Phoenix installation. My work underwent a radical change. With my structures I attempted to capture the dynamics of emotion.

The Phoenix project, with its exceptional history, now occupies a key position in my work. Previously, a story could be divided into scenes that followed one another. The Phoenix consists of a single installation that unfolds its various aspects by means of light and sound.