

ALONG THE BONES OF THE PHOENIX, A FASCINATING JOURNEY THROUGH DEATH AND EXPLOSIVE LIGHT

OTHILIA VERDURMEN AND THE CYCLE OF THE PHOENIX

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‘It is a fantasy world, but it was made real.’ This is how Othilia Verdurmen describes her installation of the mythical Phoenix. A world for all senses, not just one to look at but also feel, hear and smell. ‘The material itself breathes as a skin, everything is soft. That has a relaxing effect.’ The spectator is transported by the changing light and the soundscape. But, first of all, the artist had to experience herself: the conceptualization, research, and years of physical manual work in order to realize everything.

A fire in her studio on a cold winter’s night in January 2009 meant that this mythical world went up in flames. But the dream itself survived.

CYCLE

‘The Phoenix was almost completed when it was burnt. The story that I had in my head was as follows: there is a paradise island with four sentinels who are preparing for the arrival of the Phoenix. But no one knew that, when the Phoenix came, the whole island would burst into flames. The story turned into reality. I have been to that paradise island, but one cannot remain in paradise. The only thing that remains is the feeling, but nothing that you can touch.’

How could she continue with the process of creating a new Phoenix? ‘I didn’t begin all over again, but I simply went on’, Othilia explains. ‘At first the Phoenix was at the centre, with its wings spread and its beak open. Now he had fallen in exactly the same way as a bird dies. I was very moved by that vision: it lay on its back, beak open, with one leg in the air.’

She describes her story as a cycle of coming to the forefront and disappearing into the background again. She began to see the dead bird in a different light, from a different perspective. Not high above her, but next to

her, on the ground, tangible, and she became fascinated by the beauty of death. The cycle of death and rebirth is a primal theme. Othilia opted to present this by means of the dead bird, which ‘has an intense expression’. The fire of the Phoenix had triumphed, and therefore took on an even more intimate relationship with the bird. She did not change any part of the iron form of the bird, which survived the blaze. ‘I accepted what happened, and that helped me cope with it.’ She describes the story of a new circle, a snake that is swallowing its own tail. The abstract form of the new bird is born, repeatedly, from the dead bird.

In the burned-out installation she gradually explored the theme and watched it take shape: the four sentinels were preconfigurations of the eventual Phoenix. In this context, she encountered fundamental questions, such as: how can you represent the past? She mentions the emergence of forms and permanent, cyclical time as the real theme of her work. ‘The story’s past has genuinely taken place. The past casts its shadow forward, and that is what I want to visualize. The past is the memory of the dead Phoenix.’

DEATH

After the fire, the artist was rather shaken, as could be expected. ‘I do everything on the basis of feeling, looking, progressing through time. I had retreated into myself but I wanted to begin communicating again.’ She missed her colourful sentinels: red, orange, blue and green – the four major directions of the compass. She could only perceive the ashen colour of death. The colours of the sentinels have acquired a new form in the shape of the reborn Phoenix. Images of the installation and also of the structures of the burnt installation are projected on a fore-screen so that they again become visible and their shapes and

colours can again be seen and experienced, as 'death is an inverted birth'.

Othilia makes this kind of abstract and profound theme visible and recognizable by appealing to all the senses. The awareness of the spectators develops along with the story. She does not regard it as a single gigantic image. 'You are transported by the light, in a cinematographic way. Each structure, each detail evokes associations. It should not be directly comprehensible, I myself took five years to get to that point,' she adds. She sees her installation as an opera, although it has now taken on a different sound, one that is more down-to-earth. The darker sides of life are also represented now. The experience of the fire lies in the leading role it played.

'The photos of the fire show the total skeleton,' says Othilia, formulating her words carefully. 'The archaic skeletons have acquired a kind of indestructibility. Everything of substance has vanished, but the energy, the dynamics still remain. I heard the Phoenix call out, with his open beak. I see the form, but I cannot distance myself, I empathize with they way it lived.' Due to the image of death, which she profoundly experienced, a different atmosphere has crept into the work. 'Decay evokes the wish in me to make other things. The beauty of coming apart, fraying, controlled fraying.' She describes the sight of her burned out studio as a crater full of ash, with fumes, spirals of smoke and ice crystals from the frozen hose-water. That was a surprise: from extremely hot to extremely cold. Fatal. A cauterized paradise.

FIRE

How can you give shape in the installation to this enormous blistering heat? Othilia acknowledges that this was emotionally difficult, 'and the thing was three metres tall as well'. But that was what she wanted. 'Dying is not a sad event for the Phoenix, it is a normal occurrence in its life.'

'The exciting thing about fire is the light it contains. I work with changing light; after all, we are dealing with magic fire. Light is covered by material and these are incompatible. But the fire is easier to see than the silence that follows. Fire is warm, colourful, light, wild; whatever it is, it is always emotion. Fire is exciting, things melt, and materials enter into strange combinations with one another. After that there is no emotion left,

and that is the worst.' In that death she found a new supportive beauty. 'My first thought was: only love remains. My work is my life and my life is my work. Your identity fades at the moment that you do not know how to continue, and then you need the help of others. That is why she wished to represent this theme, which has fascinated people for thousands of years, for the benefit of others. 'What I try to do in my imaginative capacity is to empathize with and to listen to the forms that arise within me.' She emphasizes that she has to make everything herself. She cannot hire people and give them assignments to represent her vision. The rebirth of the Phoenix demands concentration and a great deal of work. She cannot blow up one form into something gigantic, because the material and what you can do with it are too important. 'You must accept that it is a lot of work, but concentration begets concentration.'

MATERIAL AND LIGHT

Othilia works with textile. 'Textile is not like paint, which you can mix to produce a certain colour.' To an ever-increasing extent she works with coloured LED lights in light wiring. 'This is new for me, and it requires more transparent materials. But I do not want to work only with tulle and transparent fabrics. That is not the expression I am looking for. Before you begin, you have to determine where the light should be, whereas illumination is actually the last task that I complete. Technology is sometimes a disruptive element in my organic process,' she laughs. And seriously: 'My work is very excessive, rich, luxuriant and baroque. The wire lighting makes it very modern, it is an interesting combination. You can do everything with light,' she explains enthusiastically, 'because every material reacts differently.' She defines it as adjusting the emotional temperature of the object to the story. Although the work has been created for artificial light, she wishes to be able to realize it in daylight as well. It changes consistently in daylight. 'I would like to keep that free tension.'

CIRCLE

'In terms of time, that paradise island is now behind me, but I still see it in front of me in terms of form. A circle appears in space. The old Phoenix lies spread-eagled on the ground with one leg sticking up, while one wing is still in the air. The new Phoenix emerges from the metres-

high fire. They form the circle.'

In the new installation, the dead Phoenix, consumed by fire, lies on the ground. Slowly, parts of the skeleton become visible under the light projections, as do the complex composition of the spread wings and the inverted head. Othilia emphasizes that this pose is very important. First the Phoenix emerged from the fire, you saw that it freed itself, not yet high in the air in triumph, but with its beak open, facing the sky. Originally the bird had an ecstatic courtship posture, a semi-conscious form of energy as can be experienced in sexual arousal. In that ecstasy there is also surrender. To Othilia, this is the essence of the Phoenix. There is surrender at birth, in sexuality, in death. Death is particularly difficult for a visual artist to display, because it means taking leave of exterior form. It contrasts with creation. 'Things vanish, disintegrate. This is the opposite of what human nature is oriented toward,' she formulates. 'If you had asked me to make a dead bird, I would probably not have arrived at this ecstatic pose,' she continues, carefully elaborating on her thoughts. But the sight of the burnt carcass of the Phoenix provided immediate inspiration for the present image. 'I had spent five months on the form. You don't easily find the right expressive pose.' By meticulously researching the anatomy of the wings of a bird, the load-bearing capacity and the possibility of flying, the skeleton became the essence of the preliminary process. With a moving camera, Othilia had already studied the way in which material disintegrates, in order to capture the incendiary process. The central feature, she emphasizes, is the lightness, the conquest of air space. The Phoenix had to have and maintain this lightness, even when it was dead.

With a force equal to tons, the iron heart was jacked open, and the scorched iron components were screwed apart.

She began by making the head because this harmonized with the image that she had seen in the fire, an image of shreds of skin hanging loose, blistered wood, an open beak.

The original Phoenix stood erect, and the spectator viewed it from below. Now it lay on its back, with one eye upward. It was a surprising perspective.

LIGHT

Othilia started working with rubber, initially in her small living room, in order to create an unfinished,

vague and diffused effect. When she occupied her new studio she immediately began working on the heart of the bird. To maintain the ecstasy and light, and to create death without tragedy, she literally installed light in the heart. There was already an opening at the back of the heart to allow a new bird to be born, and another hole was made at the front to allow the spectator to see into the treasure chamber, as it were. The pulsing light can represent the heartbeat, when it begins to beat again.

'When you die, you become transparent, as it were. Your skin lets you escape,' as Othilia herself states. For this reason, the material had to be subordinate to the light. She tried, with transparent structures, to demonstrate where the dividing line lies between life and non-life. The key question here is: how do you substantiate light?

Of course, this question was an exceptional challenge to the artist. Instead of being led by the sheen and tactility of rich material, which literally stimulates lust, Othilia had to suppress her natural urge for expression and to base her ideas on rationality, to use concepts rather than explore fabrics and materials. How did she manage?

'The light gave me direction,' says Othilia. She made the design process secondary to the beauty of light, and to all the things that light can do, with colour changes and tints. 'I surrendered to my intuition.'

At a certain moment, the forms began to manifest themselves again. She worked directly on the iron skeleton, and suddenly there were bird skulls as small flames in the background. She cut no fewer than five hundred of these shapes from thick layers of fabric, and with sharp scissors she made holes for the eyes, being left with a small shape and a mountain of waste material. This is typical of her quest for a design for abstract emotions: she discarded her previous baroque and superfluous life, as it were.

SKULLS

The bird skulls on the iron wing conveyed the idea of a colony that had once landed there. The massiveness of the image neutralized the loneliness of the figure. Othilia even regards the skulls as a leitmotiv through the Phoenix. They populate the wings of the carcass in restless swarms. 'Since the posture of the Phoenix, which was originally ecstatic in love, is now just as

appropriate in death, this means that the climax is essentially the same as the lowest point, because the transition irrevocably follows that.' The physical emotion of transcendent ecstasy, from which this issues, is turned inside out by means of the skulls tumbling over one another, swarming over the wings.

The left wing of the bird is as cold as ice. After the great fire on a freezing cold night, Othilia had seen ice crystals from the hose-water. They lay there like small glistening beads, as a kind of ice creatures: eggs that hatched to become small fish. She compares this to primal forms of life, eyeless creatures that have been living in dark caves for millions of years and have scarcely evolved. Without consciously knowing it, she presented a fresh evolutionary process with her new Phoenix.

Another image is that of the bird at the bottom of the ocean, a strong contrast with flying high in the sky. In her undersea imagination, fans suddenly appeared. 'I thought of rays of sunshine underwater. Vague remains of feathers or a new form of life that grows on decayed bones. I needed the strong lines of the fans in form-technical terms,' she explains, 'to give direction, as that part was very chaotic at such great depth.' The fans point toward the tail of the Phoenix, which is still glowing from the original fire, and also to the resurrection of the young bird in the fire itself.

NEW BIRD

The new bird arises from the ashes of the old, hopeful and in silence. It is the opposite of the old bird, but it has the same baggage, this time 'not as ballast but as riches'. Everything is pointing upward, is burgeoning, impulsively, to express an unrestricted sensation of freedom, with playful and exuberant joy. Othilia compares this to fireworks rather than scorching fire. 'The fire of mental power, energy and expression.' This also produces new materials and colours: gold, red, yellow, orange. The old bird has light from within, the new bird is only illuminated from the outside. It receives its skin and feathers from the sunlight. It exudes *joie de vivre* in all its facets. Its feathers resemble small flames. Fire makes it radiate. The fire forms a garland of light around it, but simultaneously furnishes its essence and content. The new bird carries with it the sadness

of bygone times, as well as the excitement and joy of a future in which everything is still possible. The largest fireball in our world is the sun, and in many traditional tales the Phoenix is represented as the lord of the sun. The bird covers the sun with its wings, thus bringing the darkness of night. The new Phoenix carries a sun with it, an explosion of light, and its head protrudes above this, it reaches further.

Besides a horizontal axis, of the old bird at its lowest point, there is a vertical axis of fire, up in the air. In conjunction they form a spatial diagonal, from below-left to above-right. The Phoenix, which Othilia had originally attempted to capture in a single image, has now acquired dimensions.

PRESENTATION

In the presentation, the above-mentioned story is only slowly revealed. First of all, the spectator sees a transparent façade of fabric with a gateway in the middle. Images of the installation are projected to the left and right of this. In this way, the wings are generated. The spectator sees a two-dimensional version of the Phoenix. In the gateway, the spectator himself acquires wings for a moment. He moves from one world to the next. Now the spectator himself is set in motion and walks around the installation, to inspect it from close-by and from a slight distance, accompanied by a soundscape and light.

'Previously I did not allow any leeway for the spectators to distance themselves from the object. Now everyone can literally build up a unique relationship with the figure. I have noticed that things also happen near to the figure.' Accordingly, the installation stands at the interface of visual art and theatre.

OWN LIFE

To Othilia Verdurmen, the final result, the creative process and her personal development are inseparable. The destruction of her previous installation pushed her toward complete surrender. There was no possible escape. 'I didn't walk away, but travelled right through death. It is the most murky and mysterious thing I have ever done. I was sucked into the story, down to the very deepest level. I cannot recommend it but, looking back, I have had a fabulously exciting and fascinating journey, along the bones of the Phoenix,' she laughs.