

# The Past is Never Dead

## Wendelien van Oldenborgh



Images Festival and A Space Gallery are very pleased to co-present the premiere North American exhibition of Rotterdam artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh. The 23rd Images Festival runs from 1-10 April 2010. For more information please visit [imagesfestival.com](http://imagesfestival.com).

## The Past Is Never Dead

Toward the end of Wendelien van Oldenborgh's *Instruction* (2009), the military cadets featured in the film burst out laughing. Their unexpected hilarity might seem inappropriate, puncturing as it does a film about the Netherlands' aggressive post-WWII intervention in Indonesia. But it manifests the young soldiers' unease as they recite documents relating to the Indonesian crisis — letters, historical studies, broadcasts, interviews, and memoirs — that have been largely suppressed or ignored by Dutch society. This sense of discomfort, coupled with ambivalence, crops up throughout the film in unscripted discussions that sporadically disrupt the young soldiers' recitations. However, the laughter near the film's conclusion dissipates the somber mood and takes the cadets outside their military roles and setting. In a subsequent discussion, the camera lingers on the face of one young man as his disquiet becomes palpable. Refuting the proposition that certain military actions are beyond condemnation, he insists on the need to reflect on the past "not only to implement the 'how' but to keep thinking about the 'why' behind it, basically to be able to stay critical, I think."

This tension between institutional strictures versus individual and collective action underpins *Instruction*. By casting cadets who are learning military codes and conventions in the film, Oldenborgh highlights how institutionalized behaviour is imparted and internalized — the subtle yet pervasive social conditioning that the anthropologist Marcell Mauss termed "body techniques." Filmed in a military academy, the uniformed cadets come across as tentative, self-conscious, and, above all, extremely young. Just as they occupy military space, it occupies them.

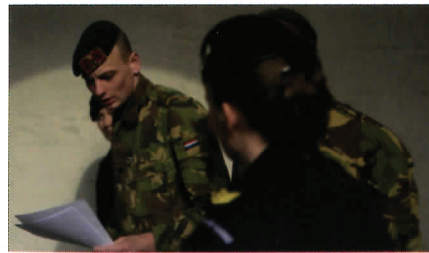
Yet if this space occupies the trainees, it doesn't fully possess them. This is shown in the questioning cadet's comments about criticality. It also emerges in an exchange contrasting the Dutch authorities' silence about the "Indonesian experience" with its expansiveness regarding the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, a more sympathetic aspect of Dutch history. By bringing to light the crisis in Indonesia, Oldenborgh reflects on those events and on their representation — how they were recorded, discussed, remembered, and denied. Despite articles in the press and questions in government, we learn that "[T]here was no follow-up, no continuation." Oldenborgh's embodied approach to retelling history connects her to artists like Sharon Hayes, Andrea Geyer, Gerard Byrne, and Mark Tribe, who re-stage, re-speak, and re-construct scenes from the past to make them anachronistically current. Sharing their sense of history as unfinished business, *Instruction* opens with a line from William Faulkner's "Requiem for a Nun," first visible on a typewritten sheet and then read in Dutch: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."



In essence, *Instruction* meditates on the struggle between self-determination and punitive institutional forces, a theme that also animates *Après la reprise, la prise* (2009), this exhibition's other work. *Après...* concerns the closure of a Levi's factory, the unsuccessful strike of its workers, and a play that grew out of their experiences. Several of the workers helped write and then performed in the play. However, as with *Instruction*, a non-linear narrative and opaque conceptual framework complicate things. Comprising two slide projections and an audio track, the work centres on an educational talk by one of the former garment workers. We see her in the classroom, in corridors, and on stairwells with students of various ethnicities. Sometimes individuals are alone but generally they pose with others. We also see an abandoned garment

workshop's interior and women being made up as for a performance. A blank screen occasionally punctuates these scenes, creating a sense of rhythm and a space for reflection. The captivating soundtrack juxtaposes snatches of conversation with ambient recordings and excerpts from the class presentation. Meanwhile, the second projector provides English subtitles for the French dialogue. Piecing together these elements — the overlapping narratives and time frames, the voices and subtitles, the factory, the strike, and the theatre production — requires time and attention.

The work is installed in a gallery-within-the-gallery, a space whose raw plywood walls reflect the unfinished, open-ended quality of *Après...* We also sense this provisional mood from the students, who, as they stand around chatting, emanate anticipation and potential. Frequently photographed beside and reflected in mirrors, their attitudes suggest that posing and being pictured are no small matters: their identity depends on being seen as well as heard. When the former factory workers discuss their work as actors, they reiterate the link between expression, performance, and self-worth. One woman says: "I felt well, to be able to speak, because in the factory I could not speak out, or say what I was thinking. Whereas the theater gave us the possibility to say what we were thinking, to speak about what we had to say." And another: "It helped me to get rid of... all this betrayal.... [I]n the end, they kicked me out, like the others, as if I were a rag. I couldn't stomach it. But thanks to the theatre, I managed to open up and release all the things I needed to say."



The women wrote their own parts, we learn, but played one another's — a process that enabled them to stand in each other's shoes, strengthening their collectivity and kinship. When they discuss these performances, their voices are buoyant, hopeful, and full of life. This passionate engagement recalls the improvised theatre of Brazilian activist Augusto Boal, which aimed to transform the compliant spectator into the empowered "spect-actor." Oldenborgh's collaborations with untrained actors also bring to mind British director Peter Watkins' radical film and TV work. Yet despite mining the legacy of art's emancipatory potential, Oldenborgh remains clear-eyed about its limitations: *Après...*, for instance, correlates the volatility of the acting profession with the precariousness of the garment industry.

"Talk. Articulate. You must articulate," the former factory worker urges. Both *Instruction* and *Après...* present oppressive work and educational environments that can curtail collective as well as personal expression and agency. Yet they also show the possibilities for resistance and critique that emerge when people push back against punitive conditions. By capturing the spark of individual and collective speech, thought, and action, Oldenborgh stimulates our critical faculties, calling forth the potential for change in us all.

-Essay by Helena Reckitt



## BIOGRAPHIES

**Wendelien van Oldenborgh** was born in Rotterdam and bases her practice there. After graduating from Goldsmiths' College in London, she worked in Belgium and Germany for many years. Van Oldenborgh investigates the political, social and cultural relationships in our society and how these are openly manifested through everyday social intercourse. During the past few years, Wendelien van Oldenborgh has had solo exhibitions in Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven), Muhka (Antwerp), Tent (Rotterdam), Casco (Utrecht) and the Musée des Beaux Arts (Mulhouse), Witte de With, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen and the Kuenstlerhaus Stuttgart, 10th Istanbul Biennial and the 28th Biennial of São Paulo.

**Helena Reckitt** is Senior Curator of Programs at The Power Plant in Toronto and is on the adjunct faculty of Art History at York University. With a background in publishing and public programming as well as curating, Reckitt has previously worked at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Georgia, the ICA, London, and Routledge, London.

front: **Wendelien Van Oldenborgh**, *Après la reprise, la prise*, 3 slide projectors, synchronised sound and subtitles in English separately projected, 15 min, 2009

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