Catalogue text for Tender Habitat, by Anne Walsh

Tender Habitat

three works by Aernout Mik
Piñata, 1999
Kitchen, 1997
Softer Catwalk in Collapsing Rooms, 1999*

A few suggestions for considering these three works by Aernout Mik: write down on your hands all the things you are projecting onto the videos, then wash your hands; notice that you can't seem to project anything at all; watch your animals playing for a while; read Temple Grandin's autobiography of autism and its usefulness to her designs for humane abattoirs; ride an elevator with some other folks, notice how you all manage; imagine that your body contains every experience you've ever had, that it forgets nothing; read Dante's Inferno, notice bodies taking on the qualities of animals and objects; wear the 32 dB ear plugs that I do on a regular basis; wear them while watching a Mik video; write a casting call for Mik's video extras; suspend belief in favor of curiosity; watch the traffic jam scene in Godard's *Weekend*; rent some porn, observe the physical rhetoric; consider that one translation of the Dutch word for beautiful (*schoonheid*) is "cleanness;" have PAL to NTSC transfers made of Mik's tapes and count how many times the dub person tells you there's NO SOUND on the tapes; consider this from Jacques Attali's NOISE, The Political Economy of Music: "Music, the quintessential mass activity, like the crowd, is simultaneously a threat and a necessary source of legitimacy; trying to channel it is a risk that every system of power must run;" go home and touch all the walls, the floor, and yourself.

In July 2000 Aernout Mik and I had several phone conversations about the works in *Tender Habitat*. (A charming device with an even more charming name, the Hybrid Coupler, enabled the recording of these chats.) What follows is an edited version of them.

Anne Walsh

AM: Everything's a bit tricky right now because the baby has her own agenda.

AW: Does she have a schedule of any kind?

AM: There are just a few things she can do. She chooses between the different things, but she doesn't always do them in the same order.

AW: So there's crying, eating, sleeping, shitting…

AM: Also finger sucking. After she eats she still wants to suck, so you put your finger in her mouth, and then you're sitting and holding her with your finger in her mouth, and she keeps on sucking, and you just can't do anything anymore.

So now I am the victim of the *Hybrid Coupler*?

AW: Otherwise known as the *Telephone Handset Audio Tap 2*. We're recording.

I thought I'd start with a list of verbs that describe actions in your works, including squirting, rising, falling, sucking, dancing, smashing, punching, spitting, tearing, crying, laughing, dropping, swinging, walking, sticking, spilling, and bouncing.

AM: Waiting.

AW: Waiting, yes. I was thinking that none of those are verbs of construction, or building, or making; they're all mostly actions on bodies or of bodies…

AM: But without a purpose, or a result. It's not like at a certain point the action has a result and something has a new life, so that backwards, you could see the action as a necessity to obtain a certain result. It's just the action itself. If the action has a result, it's mostly an entropic one. But it's more important that it's a certain action of a body or an action of a body on another body, or something from an object towards a body. It's very much……Wait! there's an insect here, an insect attacking me. It's a strange butterfly. And now it's disappeared.

AW: That's perfect!

AM: It came from somewhere, and disappeared.

There's also something that I like about framing, where things or actions come from outside, you don't know from where, get inside the frame and act on another body, and then leave the frame again. That's what I like about things that fall or fly or push into the frame – like with *Fluff*, the slime that flies in, or *Kitchen*, where the bodies of the old men get into the frame and get to one another.

AW: There's a funny mix of the mechanical and passive in these inward-moving objects - slime balls, people, dirt, bubbles. It's almost as though something has been launched in by a machine. You have no idea of the source. Something HAS HAPPENED, but you don't know what caused it. How do you imagine the viewer understanding what's happening, or understanding the cause of those objects' actions?

AM: It's very important that you don't build up a character that's doing it. It's like a pure, neutral outside. I like the idea of the outside as empty as possible.

AW: But it's an emptiness full of stuff that can launch into the frame.

AM: In *Piñata*, all the power that the people put on the objects they destroy, all the energy and the domination of these objects gets reduced because there's this dirt falling out of the sky. It covers the objects as well as the people. They're trying to get rid of the objects, but because of the dirt from above, they become like one landscape. They become one, really.

It's also very funny. There's kind of a child-fun about it, being messy.

AW: It's a very clean mess. Despite the fact that they're smashing things up, the room seems unused, and the dirt looks like it's been sorted and washed, like bagged potting soil. Even the styrofoam blocks are so pristine! How did you end up with them?

AM: I wanted to have a scene which on one hand had something to do with an interior—the space is a rough indication of that: there's a wall, a carpet, and one door—but it has only one type of thing, mainly chairs. Then the styrofoam things—on the one hand they have this color that's skin-like, there's even something sweet about it, non-violent, a bit pinky, but it makes the place more abstract. It makes it more a non-place. It's violent to break a chair because it's a recognizable object, but there's a certain strange abstraction to breaking this block of styrofoam. It's completely pointless. The aesthetic result is that what looks slightly like an interior changes into a landscape. I really like that all these things never come into completion. They move from one into the other.

It's almost like Caspar David Friedrich, because of the white with white which appears from the styrofoam.

AW: Friedrich is a surprising reference!

AM: What I find interesting about Friedrich is the distance between the person in this landscape and the landscape itself. The space is so large and sublime and the person happens to be there looking at it. He's just witnessing it instead of being part of it. There's the idea of two different realms coexisting.

The feeling of a clean mess also comes from the people, how they're doing the things. The fact that there's no real interaction between the people makes it more like a job that has to be done. And then some of them are doing it in a very efficient way.

AW: Most of them seem dispassionate about an activity that might be undertaken with a lot of passion – destruction, that is. What about that angry guy, the one with the red shirt and the black pants who seems so pissed off? He's the only person I've seen in your work whom I could call a "character."

AM: It happened, and I just let him, and in fact stimulated it when it was there. In this scene it's not just this guy. Some of the old women have a certain fanaticism, which is almost the reverse side of the angry guy. What I really like is that they're basically all

involved in the same activity, but it gets a different face with different people. And this is making them separate.

AW: Do you think people are revealed to be communicating with each other?

AM: In *Piñata* they're not.

I don't look at that side. To me the communicating lies more in the sharing of the same space at the same time. I see it more on that level than exchanging something in a direct way.

AW: All three of works in *Tender Habitat* feature physical, dramatic violence of some kind, but there's an odd absence of the erotic, or passion, in that violence. In *Kitchen*, the erotics of fighting have been removed…

AM: You think so? I don't think so at all.

AW: Because you cast old men as the players, the fighters, and they're not sexy to watch, even though fighting usually is sexy, for me.

AM: They're not fighting.

AW: Well, playing, touching.

AM: I disagree completely. To me, there are very sensual moments between the old men. Of course it's true that this is the last place you'd look for or expect to see the erotic, but that's also why I think it's there. Not at all moments, but there are certain moments when it really appears. There's something between play violence and eroticism.

AW: And affection.

AM: Yes, definitely.

AW: What did you tell them to do?

AM: First of all I told them to fight, but to move slowly and do *as if* they were fighting. I told them it should almost be slow motion, without doing a movie slow motion. So I pushed down the heat. Secondly, I asked them to think back to when they were young, and had fights on the playground, to get back this period in their lives, to evoke something playful and violent at the same time. One of the tricks, something I do often, is have them start very slowly, and I really push it back, but at a certain point the intensity of the fight forces itself to the foreground. Then it disappears into something softer and weaker. If I'd said "okay, fight violently," it would not have been an honest thing, but more their own idea about it.

One of the men got very sad. He was extremely sweet. He said "I feel really bad because I was always the one everyone was picking on." To me this was so incredibly

touching. And there were more of these things – you have these old people but inside their bodies there is this other period of their lives, present still.

AW: On second thought I think that what I was calling the repression of the erotic has to do with the role of the camera and edits, and the absence of film language signifying desire. You almost never see anybody close up. I'm trained to read sexual or erotic content in blurred bodies, in a sequence of close-ups, and of course from sound, which you don't use.

AM: It has more to do with the non-erotic gaze…

AW: ……than anything that happens inside the scene.

AM: The viewer is not a hungry viewer.

AW: You don't assume the viewer's hungry?

AM: Well, the camera's not playing a part like a character, coming closer and backing up. It's more like an observer, but not a voyeur. But of course there's always hunger in the viewer.

AW: Desperate hunger.

Despite what you say about the sensuality of touch in *Kitchen* — and I agree with you that it's there — I still think that the physical actions of the old men — and of many of your actors in other pieces, feel really diagrammatic. It reminds me of seeing theatre students learning how to sword-fight so they can perform Shakespeare.

It's like a diagram of struggle rather than a rendering of it, and it makes you think about a system. It can be quite alienating when you suspect an unknown system is in charge of people's actions — even though there are also the absurd qualities that make you laugh.

AM: This is also why I don't rehearse. Because we don't, a thousand things happen. I put people in certain diagrams, and then things go wrong, there's insecurity, there's failure, which takes away the clearness of this diagram, and allows something very to appear, which has to do with expression.

I think there's still something I'm looking for in most pieces which is rather personal, for qualities which make people different from each other, not as characters, but on a very basic level.

AW: It surprises me to hear you use the word "expression."

AM: I don't mean it in the sense of "I'm communicating and expressing myself." I mean more that something appears out of the person's actions or physical interactions with their environment, and it tells something private.

AW: What you ask people to do in your tapes makes them very vulnerable. There's not so much control over what they reveal through meaningless actions. Is this related to not looking for self-awareness in your actors?

AM: I don't mean to dismiss self-awareness altogether, just the part of it that promotes the idea of an individual as an independent creature who can be looked at as separate from his environment and other people and objects in space. You're always someone other than you think you are. You're always saying something different than you think you're saying. What your whole body has to say is so much more complex.

AW: Canetti describes laughter as originally an animal reaction, a "physical reaction to the escape of potential food." For me it's one of his fascinating and scary understandings of human power relations as articulated by the body.

I've also been thinking about Beckett. In both his and your work the nature of the languages used is so physical, and the structures so circular. Is he someone you admire?

AM: I definitely do. I never think that my work is a direct reference to him but I do think that it's very close. There are also big differences. The more aesthetic and cut off side of my work is close to Beckett, but my work has more direct energies going on than you would see with Beckett.

I haven't seen many of the plays, but I like the repetitive, hypnotic stream of information in the writing. Especially in his later writings there is the quality of hearing an interior monologue, so you're almost within someone's head. I work with real situations, but part of it is always like a vision, or a memory of something, or the turning around in someone's own head, an obsessive repetition that has something to do with digging in your own unconscious to get this memory back.

AW: In some ways what your work is doing is theatre already - some of your pieces with live people are "performative" without exactly being performances. Are you interested in making works for theatre? It would be an interesting dilemma if you think about the fact that all but one of your pieces is silent.

AM: It's a question I'm asking myself right now, because I've been asked by one of the main Dutch theatre companies to make a play for them.

AW: That's sort of where Beckett comes in. How do you write a script when there's no language involved?

AM: You could approach speech the same as a barking human. This is what I like about Beckett, the stream of sounds that set the mood. It's completely non-communicative speech.

AW: It keeps people bound to their bodies.

AM: Absolutely. So it might not be impossible to do something like that. It would definitely need a completely different approach.

Wait, there's this strange pigeon coming in my house again.

AW: Flying?

AM: Walking. It's a very large pigeon that just walks in from the garden.

AW: Do you think it's always the same one?

AM: Yes. Because there were two before. Pigeons have a lifetime relationship. And then one of them fell out of the tree, and died. I buried it a few weeks ago.

AW: So this is its partner?

AM: Yes.

AW: It's lonely. It's coming over to spend some time with you.

AM: To chat and have some breakfast.

AW: I suspect it's not an intentional reference, but there's a ghost in your videos of horror, disaster, and action movies, which are to me the three most hyperbolic movie genres. A lot of your reduce down to the truly abstract and absurd content of those genres. They leave out the diagetic and formal narratives, and create instead a very opaque narrative from that absurdity.

AM: I like those genres because the sensation of the body is so central. It's what I also like about Hong Kong action movies, where the fighting sequences become like a theatre of the body. At the same time, it's only 50% of my work. It's not a critique or a reflection on any genre, or the movie industry. They're echoes.

I have been looking a lot at very early film footage, when they couldn't move the camera. I remember one particularly beautiful city scene - a fire breaks out, the fire engine comes at high speed, all the men jump out, unroll the hose, and start pumping water. But since the camera can't pan toward the fire, the water goes outside the frame. There's all this action, but where it's pointed at is not in the frame. It is incredibly beautiful, and very different from the whole movie language when you get into montage and the narrative of montage. What I find interesting about the frame is that you cut this part out of reality, but then there's this giant cosmos still around it, always there and influencing what's happening inside.

AW: On a baser note, I was watching "The Towering Inferno" recently, and thinking about your work. Every so often you get a cutaway shot from either the sublime visual narrative of the fire or the human interest story to these helicopter long shots of the burning building. These views of remind you that this is the context. That's what's missing from your tapes. The camera stays where it is, trained on this scene. You don't back away and provide the big picture.

AM: There's no way you can locate it.

AW: And you can't explain it either.

AM: That's where some people find this no-escape feeling.

AW: One way I'm inclined to read your camera is that it's enacting an institutional gaze, social norms looking at social *abnorms*, for instance. I'm tempted to read the videos as offering to the viewer the idea that if you fail to read outside the conventional signs given by personality, language, gesture, and other meaning-making codes, you miss ways people do communicate meaningfully. That there's a lot to see.

AM: Part of the reason the camera is acting like that is exactly what you say, that it makes it possible to see a lot. The things I want to look at are in the corner, not the main actions, the things that happen just like that, or because of something unexpected. If I manipulated the gaze with this narrative language of montage, I would not see this. It's also a way to protect a certain kind of integrity in the whole scene and of the people inside the screen, to provide a sense of normality, in fact. That it HAS HAPPENED. So it has a certain flow of time that is not too different from your own experience of yourself in time and your environment.

AW: I see that, although I think that the silence that the pieces take place in slows time down, abstracts, and dehistoricizes what you're seeing, so that it becomes more mythic, or more sublime in the case of *Softer Catwalk*…. Even though you think, "gee, the people aren't wearing any kind of safety gear, that could actually be a dangerous situation," the silence almost stops you from believing it's really happening.

AM: On the one hand the slowing down has a hypnotic and therefore fixating effect on the viewer's body, on the other hand the slowing down gives the viewer the opportunity to reposition himself in relation to his environment.

AW: The slow, oscillating camera pan in *Softer Catwalk*… makes me think about traffic accidents. You slow down and take a look because everybody else is slowing down, but it's never a long enough or satisfying enough look. In *Softer Catwalk*…, you get to watch the disaster, which is more sensual than tragic, happening just for you.

AM: I asked the people to move through this space as if they were in another space, that's why they don't react to anything, they don't show any emotion that has any reference to the disaster that's going on. So you have these two realms that fit into each other. This kind of shift is maybe the kind of shift you feel if you pass a traffic accident. There's something really very silent and remote from you about it, and at the same time it's extremely close to you.

When you see it installed, the screen is touching the floor - the bottom of the image is level with your space. Then the pan is doing something strange with the floor-touching and with the wall, because the image is running along the floor. There's really a sense of touch. There is the remoteness of these people with the space, but there's a certain softness in the camera gaze. There's no hurry in it, even though there seems to be so much disastrous going on.

AW: When we were talking about images we would use in this publication, you mentioned documentary photos from the production of movie special effects. Knowing your earlier sculptural and installation works, I can imagine why you've been attracted to those images. But special effects are usually used in movies to make seamless realities, either naturalistic or imaginary ones, and your work doesn't often attempt any kind of illusionism. In fact the artifice is blatant.

AM: I'm more attracted to the magazines' reports on the construction of the effect than to the special effect itself. What I always find very interesting about these pictures is that you see the results of the special effect and the construction of it at the same time. You see something which is supposed to be an independent thing, or creature, but it's being moved and controlled by people with sticks! Or you have a hyperrealistic model of a certain scene seen in a normal scale environment, which creates the very powerful suggestion of two realities coexisting in the same time and space. It's completely fake but still very convincing.

This is definitely something I'm looking for in the design of the installation. The original set-up of the exhibition space is manipulated and changed, and then the reality of the videos themselves draws your attention to something completely different. You have the same feeling of these two realities being active at the same time. That's also why I use low walls a lot. They create a new space within the already existing space, one that especially relates to the lower part of your body. The top of your head is often almost higher than the wall, and you can partly see over and past it to the existing walls. You end up with two incomplete spaces. This sensation wouldn't work in darkness, which is why I always use ambient light. I try to make the parallel reality of the videos as strong as the architectural environment itself, and vice versa.

AW: Some quality of your spaces reminds me of the idea of a habitat, like those groovy rodent habitats with tubes and wheels and compartments. Is there some analogy between the viewer's experience of being controlled - socially and perceptually - by your architecture, and the actions and circumstances your subjects are dealing with in the video images?

AM: Most of the architecture I create has a circuit form. It affects the way you move and relate to the video images. Because of the low walls you're aware of other people. You somehow altogether mirror the appearance of groups in the video. With other people looking at the work you start to become a group. This also happens in the videos: a group starts to appear, not so much because the people have something in common, but because they happen to be there. Also because their behaviors are limited, or some effects happen to them from outside, they gradually turn into a group. Something similar happens with the viewer. Formally, there is a mirroring effect.

AW: What is it that's so compelling to you about the group?

AM: What intrigues me most is the relationship of the body with its environment – either with objects or other bodies around it. I'm looking for something that is a reversal of the person as an independent thing in its environment, controlling it. There's

something about closeness, either to objects or other bodies, that I find touching. This happens in groups too, especially ones that didn't intend to be groups.

AW: One of my favorite sections in Crowds and Power is Canetti's discussion of inadvertent groups. The whole idea of sperm as a crowd, for instance, is really amazing.

AM: When I'm shooting there is some parallel to social experiments. I don't rehearse, I bring together people who mostly don't know each other and whom I hardly know, I build this environment, we have this very basic set of behaviors, we start to work, and always within 15 minutes something organic starts to happen: everybody knows his own place, knows what's right and what's wrong. So this is a very powerful process. The whole thing becomes like one room, one organ. I find this very touching also. There's a balance with the environment and an organic unity that happens so quickly. And also on an object level, I like to look at a space and someone in a space as equal. Another way of reading *Softer Catwalk in Collapsing Rooms*, without looking at it as a disaster scene, is that it's almost like a living thing. The room is living and breathing. And the bodies are becoming more like objects themselves.

People have been saying "okay, you want to treat people like objects," but I think it's really the reverse. I like to see the life in the objects, having them both very close to each other.

AW: In quite a number of your pieces the people are less animate than the objects are.

AM: For me this has something to do with closeness, to being really close to each other. You already know that people are alive, but objects have to do more effort to make that clear.

AW: You don't indicate closeness by the typically legible signs of it. You're exploring how closeness makes itself felt and known without the usual signifier, touch.

AM: Presence, and breathing.

AW: That's a very subtle definition of closeness.

AM: Warm bodies present in space.

***Pinata*, 1999**
Video Installation, two synchronized projections

***Kitchen*, 1997**
Video Installation

***Softer Catwalk in Collapsing Rooms*, 1999**
Video Installation