

very funny

Noemi Smolik talks to
Wim T. Schippers about
his long and diverse career.
Featuring a specially
commissioned portrait
by Blommers & Schumm

Wim T. Schippers is an artist, broadcaster, filmmaker, playwright and songwriter; he also voices the characters of Ernie and Kermit the Frog for the Dutch-language version of *Sesame Street* (1976–ongoing). He began making art in Amsterdam in the 1960s, where he formed artist groups with Ger van Elk, Willem de Ridder and Bob Westorp. Inspired by movements such as fluxus and pop, Schippers used television and radio as media to express his ideas – a move that horrified his peers in the Dutch art community at the time. He wrote and directed many experimental radio and television programmes for the Dutch broadcasters NOS, VARA and VPRO, including *De Fred Haché Show* (1971–72) and *Hoepla* (Whoops!, 1967), which hosted bands such as The Jimi Hendrix Experience and Soft Machine, and which was the first show on Dutch television to feature a naked woman. His radio programme, *Ronflonflon avec Jacques Plafond* (1984–91), was one of the most popular in the Netherlands. Schippers is also the author of over 40 plays. His mix of absurdist humour with commercial broadcasts and traditional artistic media is now considered pioneering. His 2016 retrospective at Bonner Kunstverein was his first solo exhibition outside of the Netherlands.



NOEMI SMOLIK

One of your first actions, while still an art student, was to cofound the *Adynamic Centre* with Ger van Elk and Bob Wesdorp in 1961. What was the concept behind it? Or wasn't there one? In an interview screened as part of your *Bonner Kunstverein* exhibition, you spoke of how there is no meaning, since *Adynamic* is only a 'trademark'.

WIM T. SCHIPPERS

I introduced the adjective 'adynamic' to react against prevailing notions at the time that art be 'vital', 'expressive', 'subjective', 'spectacular' or 'wild'. Inspired by Kurt Schwitters, I drew attention to insignificance, to inane things and even to dullness. Not as dogma, though. After all, silly little things can be beautiful, too.

NS One of these 'silly little things' was the *Adynamic Action (1961/63)* for which you emptied a bottle of lemonade into the sea.

WS I first did this action in the Dutch seaside resort of Petten without an audience. Then, in 1963, I repeated it in front of a television crew. Reporters on the beach asked us what we were doing. I told them we were making a programme about modern art, *nouveau réalisme*, zero, fluxus and pop. Pop art was unheard of in the Netherlands at the time. They misheard 'pop art' and, the next day, the newspapers reported that we were messing around with 'potaarde' – potting soil!

NS Early in your career, you caught the attention of the director of Amsterdam's *Stedelijk Museum*, Willem Sandberg. How did you meet him?

WS My father, who was very religious, refused to support me during my time at the *Kunstnijverheidsschool* [an applied arts school that is now the *Gerrit Rietveld Academie*]. I was very poor and worked in a plastic factory and as a night watchman. During my second year, I exhibited some drawings. My teachers didn't like the work – or me. But the city of Amsterdam supported artists by buying art directly from them. The *Stedelijk* selected my drawings, paid me 1,300 guilders [GB£3,250] for

'Everything about modern art was deadly serious at the time. That is why we started to make jokes about it.'

WIM T. SCHIPPERS

Previous page
Wim T. Schippers, 2016

This page
Installation view of
'Wim T. Schippers: A Retrospective',
2016, at *Bonner Kunstverein*

Opposite
The Birds (Die Vögel), 1962–2005
mixed media,
83 x 175 cm

Courtesy
Previous page: Blommers & Schumm;
photograph: Blommers & Schumm •
This page: the artist and *Bonner Kunstverein* •
Opposite: the artist and *Bonner Kunstverein*;
photograph: Mareike Tocha

them and exhibited them. The director of my school called me and told me this was unacceptable – as long as I was enrolled in lessons, everything I made was also regarded as work by the teachers. So, I left school. Almost immediately, Sandberg, then the director of the *Stedelijk*, invited me to put on an exhibition. I wanted to do this with my friends, Ger and Bob, but Bob wasn't interested and I never heard back from Ger. So, in December 1962, I opened a solo show in *Museum Fodor*, which was run by the *Stedelijk*.

NS For that exhibition, 'Zaken der Waarachtige Oninteressantie' (*The Actually Not Interesting Rooms, 1962–63*), you covered the floor of one room with broken glass and another with salt. What was the evolution of this idea?

WS I knew of dada, Marcel Duchamp and Schwitters. The latter two were my heroes, though not many people seemed to be aware of them at the time. But I had the feeling that we were at a pivotal point in the visual arts. At the *Museum Fodor*,

I showed strange readymades: mattresses, a Pan Am model plane, collages, assemblages and new sculptures, mostly titled *Adynamical Object*. The *Stedelijk* purchased *Plastolux (1962)*, which was included in the exhibition at *Bonner Kunstverein*. The glass and the salt rooms were part of my series of floor coverings. The first, *Peanut-Butter Floor*, was debuted in 1969 in the *Mickery* gallery in *Loenersloot*. In 1997, I showed a new version at a retrospective, initiated by *Sjarel Ex* and *Harry Ruhe*, at the *Centraal Museum Utrecht*. Then, in 2010, I devised a new version for *1M2*, a small gallery in *Amsterdam*, followed in 2011 by the largest version to date: a 700kg piece for *Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam*. The latest one, shown in *Bonn*, was the fifth iteration.

NS You were one of the first artists to work with television – not, as was usual in the 1960s, in order to criticize it as a mass medium, but 'affirmatively' as we might say today. You spoke of television being the biggest museum in the world.

WS I was once asked where you could see my works of art. I replied: 'I exhibit in the biggest gallery in the country.'

NS How did you become involved with television?

WS In 1962, the Dutch broadcaster *VARA* made a programme called 'Spiegel der Kunsten' (*Mirror of Art*), which featured documentary footage of my exhibition. Later, I met the artist and presenter *Willem de Ridder*, and we had the idea of doing broadcasts about contemporary art. We sent our proposal to *VARA* and they agreed. For our 1963 show, 'Signalement, Kunst na 1960' (*Reporting: Art After 1960*), we discussed works by *George Brecht*, *Stanley Brouwn*, *Roy Lichtenstein*, *Henk Peeters* and *Andy Warhol*. We also met *Daniel Spoerri* in *Paris*. After *Yves Klein* died, we went to see *Rotraut*, his widow, but she was not very co-operative – perhaps because we were not especially interested in her work.

NS How did people react to the show?

WS It was notorious; people became very angry ...

NS No wonder! In this clip, for instance, you can see a young woman in a bikini presenting an abstract painting as if for an infomercial. I can imagine it would upset not only the audience but also people in the arts.

WS Everything about contemporary art was so deadly serious at that time. That is why we started to make jokes about it. We also used background music, like in a movie, and we ate big cakes while talking







1

about [Claes] Oldenburg. We also filmed performances of our own works: De Ridder's *Paper Constellations* – a big ball of paper moving through the streets of Amsterdam – and my action on the beach in Petten. It wasn't until 1965 that Dutch institutions began to show an interest in American pop art. The director of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Wim Beeren, discovered Roy Lichtenstein while working on another exhibition. Then, in 1964, Edy de Wilde, Sandberg's successor at the Stedelijk, got wind of it and decided to go one better by hosting the first pop art show in the Netherlands, 'American Pop Art', which had originated at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark.

NS *De Wilde once dismissed you as an 'unserious' artist ...*

WS That was around 1973, when I was busy with television shows. He had considered buying some of my new works, so I gave him a proposal for some installations, but he doubted whether I could still be regarded as a serious visual artist after doing television.

NS *With hindsight, we can see how your programmes sparked an interest in pop art in the Netherlands. But, after this point, you stopped making and showing art and started to work exclusively for television – why?*

WS The institutions didn't want to collaborate with me and I couldn't find a good

gallery. I didn't want to just comply with what the galleries were expecting, so I got by: firstly, with some graphic design work; later, with television, which I loved doing. I didn't like the art world: all the people working in it who claim to know better than you what it is you are doing and all these artists who just want to be famous! The art community didn't like what I did on television, calling it tasteless and horrible. But *they* were the ones following the clichés. It wasn't until much later that my programmes were recognized as being not conventional broadcasting but art – ha! In 1969, I received a letter from the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Their curator, Edward F. Fry, wanted to curate an exhibition of my work. But, at the time, I was so poor and unhappy I forgot to answer.

NS *How did you return to making art?*

WS I never really stopped. I participated in some group exhibitions of Dutch art but I wasn't able to develop the 'art and technology' ideas I dreamed up – with the exception of a complicated construction, based on controlled electromagnetic power, in which a large stone floats in space (*Floating Stone*, 1999). I made this in collaboration with Delft University of Technology. Now it is at the Museum Boijmans, and was shown in 2010 at the World Expo in Shanghai.

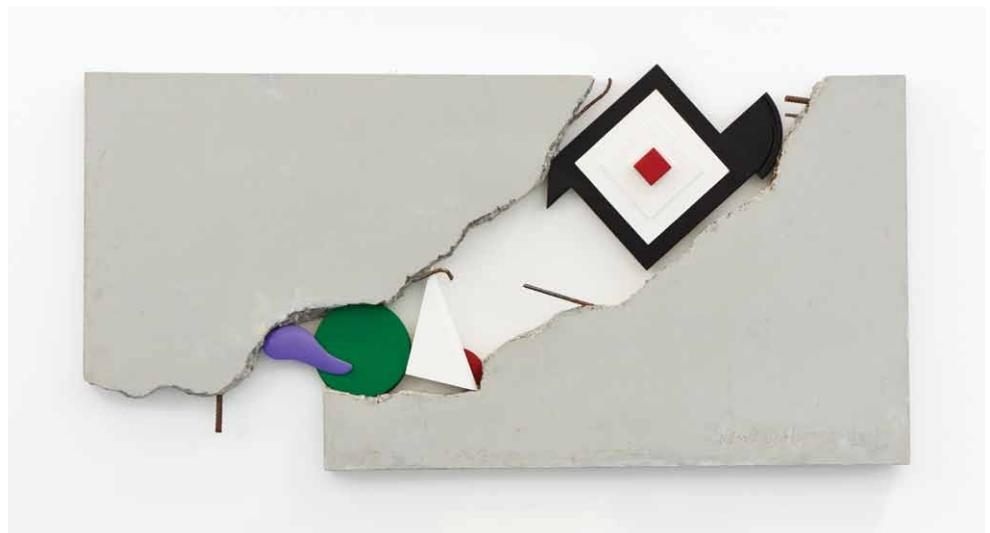
In 1967, De Wilde asked me to participate in the Marzotto Prize exhibition. Pierre Restany was the chairman of the jury. I planned to make five large reliefs, one of them kinetic. But I didn't have the money to realize them. So, I showed my plans to Frits Becht – who owned one of the largest collections in the Netherlands – and told him I had no money to make the works. He supported me by purchasing one, titled *Divisions* (1967), which was shown in Bonn. *The Eggs* (1966) is at the Boijmans and two others are in the Stedelijk collection. The fifth, a kinetic piece, is dismantled. The Marzotto Prize was won that year by Arman.

NS *Do you think art still has the power to provoke?*

1
Divisions, 1966, mixed media on wood,
230 × 230 × 65 cm

2
Langando, 2016, wood, metal,
paint and mixed media, 166 × 80 cm

Courtesy
1 the artist, Agnes & Frits Becht Collection
and Bonner Kunstverein; photograph:
Mareike Tocha • 2 the artist
and Bonner Kunstverein; photograph:
Mareike Tocha



2



3



4



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'I was never looking to provoke: whatever I did, I did because I liked doing it.'

WIM T. SCHIPPERS

WS I was never looking to provoke: whatever I did, I did because I liked doing it. I still find the action of emptying a bottle of lemonade into the sea beautiful.

NS *As someone who was effectively rejected by the art community for some time, how did it feel when your show at the Bonner Kunstverein was so positively received?*

WS The director of the kunstverein, Michelle Cotton, curated a great show. I was very happy with it and it encouraged me to make new work. I am not against success, but I do not place 'success' first. I simply do things and show them – and people have the right to think they are silly or stupid or whatever. ♣

Noemi Smolik is a critic based in Bonn, Germany.

Wim T. Schippers is based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In 2016, his work was the subject of a retrospective exhibition at Bonner Kunstverein, Germany. Launched in February 2015, and remaining open throughout 2016, the Wim T. Schippers Room at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, featured the institution's collection of the artist's work. In 2017, Schippers will debut a musical composition with the Ives Ensemble. He is currently working on a commission for the Nemo Museum, Amsterdam, in collaboration with Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands.

3
Going To the Dogs,
1986, performance
documentation,
Stadsschouwbourg,
Amsterdam

4
Hoepla, 1967,
(with Phil Bloom),
production still

5
Barend Servet,
1973,
(with Corty Brak as
the Singing Monk),
production still

Courtesy
3 André Beekman/Theatre Collection
Special, Collection UvA; photograph:
André Beekman • 4 & 5 NOB-AVAC
photo archive