

Fountain of Wellbeing (Walls Don't Clear Water)

Text by Rik Dijkhuizen

In the nineteenth century, Catholic friars settled down in the village of Dongen to establish a **sanatorium** where people for whom daily life presented too many challenges were hospitalised: *Huize Overdonk*. Uprooted from their familiar surroundings, these ‘retarded’ people lived in ‘suitable’ seclusion far away from the ‘unsafe’ world ‘outside’ — where they could be cared for according to the principles and methods that were then deemed right. The river Donge, which had been flowing through the Dongen landscape for centuries and which fed the local crops, produced a lively leather industry and cared for the bodies in its vicinity, now acted as a natural and instinctive barrier between village and ‘asylum’.

The sanatorium, etymologically a place for healing, formed a hermetic context that was fully equipped as such: with sleeping quarters, sanitary facilities, dining rooms and other facilities for treatment, gathering and to find rest. In the adjoining park, a swimming pond was created where people could ponder and get some exercise — and when a moment of ‘safe’ seclusion or discipline was deemed necessary, there were rooms specifically built to keep people in solitary confinement. *Huize Overdonk* was a closed chain of designated and undesignated rooms with strict codes and *regimes* that *produced* and dictated each movement and behaviour of patients and nursing staff alike.

With the **isolation cell**, this regime becomes tactile in the most negative and hostile way. This room, monochrome in colour and without windows that could offer contact or distraction, existed far removed from shared spaces, completely hidden from view. Here, ‘unruly’ patients were often separated indefinitely, with only a weighted mattress on the floor and a ‘tear sheet’ to cover their naked body with — all while being kept under constant surveillance by caretakers through a mirrored acrylic window and a small hatch in the door. In this carefully choreographed panoptic torture chamber, ‘safety’ was violently enforced on body and mind, leaving deep traces with those who had to live through this horrible event — but also in the threatening anticipation with everyone else.¹

The thick walls continue to speak. They witnessed and remember the many hours patients with mental and emotional crises were locked up and severely mistreated — but also the shame and suffering of careworkers who were forced to carry out protocol. Although this room is no longer in use and more humane methods are being practised within psychiatric care², the echo of trauma is palpable within the buildings and bodies of what is now called GGz Breburg. Despite a failed attempt to cover up its former purpose with a grey carpet and a painting of an idyllic landscape on the wall, the door to the isolation cell is still kept shut and the painful memories this place evokes carefully avoided. *Here, trauma lives on, hidden from sight, where it proliferates in memory.*

The institutionalised care of people who are mentally challenged or incapable of participating independently in our society carries a long and turbulent history — with countless traumas it has produced, on both sides of the wall. Spaces of care, such as psychiatric institutions, were created to provide a safe haven for people in peril, but they are also representatives of constant security, surveillance, intimidation and power. Still, these places are the embodiment of being forced to wear a *dunce cap*³ and to be constantly condemned, corrected and **separated** like a *fool*.⁴ Why do these practises persist so tenaciously? How do we, incidentally or structurally, care for our wellbeing, and that of others?

This text is part of the exhibition *Fountain of Wellbeing (Walls Don't Clear Water)* by artist Rik Dijkhuizen. During his residency at *Vrouw Muskens* in collaboration with psychiatric institution *GGz Breburg* in Dongen, The Netherlands, he stayed in a former isolation cell and developed a body of work that responded to this specific context. The result, including the final version of this text, is presented at the *Beautiful Distress House*, Amsterdam on 11, 12 and 13 August 2022.

Rik Dijkhuizen (1988) is a visual artist whose multidisciplinary work reflects on mental health in a hyper-individualistic society. In his scenographic installations and imaginative narratives, he uses numerous (personal) references and connotations to create sanctuaries for wellbeing and collective embodiment; convincing topos that invite and call for reflection. These places are not quite of this world but feel strangely familiar and are situated somewhere between reality and fiction. Water is a recurring material in his work. Rik studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy Amsterdam, and Art History and Aesthetics at the University of Amsterdam. www.rikdijkhuizen.com

Although *patients* are now called *clients* and solitary confinement has fallen out of favour, the authoritarian regime that determines who is *productive* and who is *deficient* and needs to be pushed to the margins of our society is reproduced in ever more nuanced ways. People who fall outside the norm, who have been judged unfit, whose behaviour strikes us as ‘abnormal’ or with whom we simply don’t know what to do are constantly exposed to increasingly sophisticated mechanisms that subject, guard and discipline them. The high fences have been removed and there is more social time, but orderly safety is still maintained and measured against predefined value systems at both micro and macro levels. Out of fear of the unknown, the *gatekeepers* and *supervisors*⁵ treat a rapprochement between this world and the one outside with the greatest suspicion — and thus the authoritarian regime that separates good from bad continues to hold sway. The thick concrete walls are symbols of a world struggling to be open to **alterity**, but history teaches us: walls manage to separate our bodies but they do not sanitise our wellbeing.

*‘We are all bodies of water. [...] ebbing, fluvial, dripping, coursing, traversing time and space, pooling as both matter and meaning. [...] The space between our selves and our others is at once as distant as the primeval sea, yet also closer than our own skin — the traces of those same oceanic beginnings still cycling through us. [...] Water entangles our bodies in relations of gift, debt, theft, complicity, differentiation, relation. [...] It is here, in the borderzones of what is comfortable, of what is perhaps even livable, that we can open to alterity — to other bodies, other ways of being and acting in the world — in the simultaneous recognition that this alterity also flows through us.’*⁶

Exposed to the demand to perform perfectionism, in our hyper-individual and neo-liberal society we have become increasingly responsible for ourselves. Our bodies are seen as autonomous systems that have become increasingly isolated from the *shared* and the *common*. Care, as an institution, has become a transaction: the patient consumes care only when and where it is needed and, after the initial self-diagnosis, awaits specialised and efficient treatment ‘patiently’.⁷ A gaping wound is stitched up, a tumour removed, disease remedied with medication, but the wounds that require a different kind of care — because they are intangible, *like water* — are treated as a threat or hidden from view by *surrounding them with walls of stigmatising misunderstanding*.

The orderly world that we have carefully built for ourselves — and which keeps us in a comfortable grip — is in a constant battle against the enigmatic waters, which slowly penetrates the smallest cracks of our houses, institutions and roads, erodes our familiar surroundings and introduces uncertain change from its turbulent depths. Water is the unwelcome guest that cannot be placed, separated, controlled or understood — which offers a *safe home* to **unknown creatures** that seem to pose a threat. These creatures are seldom seen or caught; they dwell beneath the glittering surface in murky waters and find shelter in places they know better than the bodies on land — those who look through rippling water and see nothing but a monster to be suppressed or driven away by force — thus *turning* the misunderstood stranger into a fearsome enemy.⁸

How different is this creature from us, with whom we share the water? Is there not a single fin, gill or scale to be found on our own bodies? Are we not all, sooner or later, treated as strangers and violated as soon

as we disturb the orderly peace — because we understand the world differently? Why do the walls we use to protect ourselves so often turn against us? Can we welcome the unknown and come closer to ourselves and each other, even if it is not always easy? **We are water** and like *watery bodies* we are connected, to each other and to our changing landscapes — fluid, dynamic, always in motion, everywhere closeby, always a becoming, never a being. Or, as Astrida Niemanis teaches us: *‘I am a singular, dynamic whorl dissolving in a complex, fluid circulation.’*⁹

Water flows in tiny ripples or huge waves, as ebb and flow, murmuring and swirling, splishing and splashing through streams and rivers, in lakes, seas, oceans — and through every fibre of our porous bodies. It surrounds us, feeds us, protects us, drowns us — water brings us abundance together with scarcity; it *connects us* in shared responsibility. It brings pleasure and respite, it washes away sorrow by making it part of the stream — which flows elsewhere to become the material of our worst nightmares. Water provides by withholding, it builds by wreaking havoc — *to water all is equal*. Every watery encounter is absorbed and stored inside its particles and distributed through the landscape like endless echoes. Water, the material from which we were created, moves in circles that turn us, *isolated individuals*, into a *watery community*.

Fed by the water that carries and floods us all, our bodies take shape as a **fountain of wellbeing**, through which our memories, challenges, traumas, desires, griefs and happiness, flow richly and ever so often misunderstood. They gather in our stomach and move through our veins with every sigh. They flow smoothly over our chest and exit our bodies, drop by drop — or spouting under great pressure. They form calm bassins, joyful cascades, grandiose sculpture groups — but also angry jets and spitting *creatures* that embody need and suffering. And while one fountain is neatly showcased on a busy square because it provides light-hearted entertainment, the other one stands leaking, decaying and surrounded by a wall, completely hidden from view. And although the water flows in all directions and the rock is cracked here and there - anyone who looks at the abject structure long enough will see that this fountain, too, feeds the pool of joy in our own backyard.

¹ During his residency, Dijkhuizen stayed in the former isolation cell of the Dongekant department at psychiatric institution GGz Breburg in Dongen. He renovated this room, which in recent years had served as a storeroom, after which the door was then left open during the day, at the artist’s request, with the aim of bringing this room, and what it embodies for clients as well as employees, out of the realm of fear and avoidance — thus starting the process of overcoming this painful history. He also spent 24 hours in solitary confinement, as a performing research, hoping to get an impression of the specific experience - without assuming that separation can be reproduced in such a staged way.

² At GGz Breburg, the isolation cell has not been used for several years, but in many other institutions it is still a common method of maintaining order and *guarding safety* - despite the controversy it has generated in recent years with new (scientific) insights concerning institutionalised psychiatric care.

³ *Being forced to wear a dunce cap* is an old custom in a.o. education. Schoolchildren had to wear this headgear as punishment for their ‘stupidity’, which made them a recognisable target for bullying by classmates, with the aim of disciplining and normalising them. This object is derived from the Phrygian cap, which according to myth, was first worn by King Midas to hide the donkey ears he received from the gods as punishment for his stupidity.

⁴ The ‘fool’ is a character type with a long history, in antiquity

(such as Plato’s allegory of the Ship of Fools, made famous by, among others, Albrecht Dürer’s wood engravings and paintings by Hieronymus Bosch), Christian tradition, the medieval court (as a jester), tarot, the theatre (from the Italian zannis to the later circus clowns), in many philosophical works, such as Desiderius Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly* (1509) and Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* (1882) - right through to the ways we refer to it in our daily lives. The fool stands outside society and does not conform to the social norm - which makes them the target of constant ridicule, condemnation, bullying and punishment. They follow their own path without knowing where it will lead, but the question remains: are they heading for the abyss or pioneering ahead of us? The ‘fool’ is a striking embodiment of the way in which the wise and the insane are never far from each other.

⁵ More specifically, in the borderzone between inside and outside this closed context, there are forces and bodies that constantly control who is allowed access on which side of the divide: carers and managers, as well as mentors, administrators and *productive bodies* in our neoliberal society that exclude the ‘patient’ from participation in it.

⁶ Astrida Niemanis, *Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water*. in *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice*, eds. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

⁷ Boris Groys, *Philosophy of Care*. Londen, New York: Verso, 2022.

⁸ This analogy is a direct allusion to the 1954-56 film series *Creature of the Black Lagoon*. In this series, a misunderstood creature is discovered in the Amazon region and hunted down as a monster. After several violent attempts, it is captured and ‘humanised’ by surgically removing its fins and scales. In the final part, the creature is falsely accused of murder, which ignites its blind rage and makes it flee to the beach. Here, he looks out over the sea, longing for the place he can never return to.

⁹ Astrida Niemanis, *Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water*. 2012.