

# LEVIATHAN

Laurence Aëgerter 2015

Words by Sophie Wright

Leviathan: a mythic sea-monster, the gatekeeper of hell where the damned disappear to – and Laurence Aëgerter's most recent project. Commissioned by the Dolhuys, national museum of psychiatry and the mind in Haarlem, the Netherlands, the project saw the artist inhabit a former isolation room in the high-security, closed unit of a psychiatric institution in Bennebroek, staging participatory installations with approximately 100 patients and personnel over the course of a week.

In new hands, the once empty cell found itself full of plants one day and awash with music the next, each daily metamorphosis responding to the sterile nature of the room and its history. To reflect on the controversial present-day use of solitary confinement in the Netherlands was one key part of *LEVIATHAN*; to reimagine brighter possible futures for a space heavily stained by trauma, a more difficult feat.



*LEVIATHAN* is a timely project as the Netherlands has recently come under scrutiny for its mental health protocol. Last year, it was reprimanded by the UN for suspected human rights abuse due to the use of solitary confinement in youth care, and a new bill entitled 'Zorg en dwang' (care and coercion) is currently under construction. Though the treatment of seclusion is dwindling, figures remain vague about how many isolation cells are still in use.

Calling into question the emotional and mental implications of isolating patients, Aëgerter's 'interventions' act as an antidote to the rigid 'crisis-intervention' policy that the cell represents. They are healing measures that subvert the very framework of the isolation cell, inviting patients and personnel back in at their own will to experience and imagine a range of new environments that meditate on the needs, dreams and desires of the body and mind. A space once defined by emptiness and exclusion becomes a tactile, animated site of human contact.

Challenging a static understanding of knowledge and history is a key feature in Aëgerter's practice. In *Opening Soon/Opening Now* (2009), the artist was invited to occupy a former brothel. The space was transformed several times, fulfilling temporary functions such as a public swimming pool, a Turkish snack bar and a public library. Private performances were enacted in these new environments, reversing the pattern and power structures of the visits that formely took place in the small space (9 m<sup>2</sup>). These interventions revived the historic site, reflecting on the past in the present to make way for new readings of an age-old topic.



Much like the former brothel, the past is somehow implicit in each transformation that the 5 x 2.8 m<sup>2</sup> isolation cell in *LEVIATHAN* underwent. The empty, bare-walled chamber was occupied by a curious series of inhabitants, objects and activities, each an incarnation of the deep recesses of the imprisoned mind, or a palliative response to it.

At the beginning of the week, the room became a terrarium, the temporary home to five giant pythons. Around fifty stunned patients came to discover the slow-moving prisoners behind the plexiglass. Wrenched from their habitat, they writhed through the empty space under the fluorescent lights, suspended in a state between sleeping and waking.

On Tuesday, the cell hosted a re-enactment of Ilya and Emilia Kabakovs' *Punishment of Household Objects*. A set of dark curtains was used to create a second, makeshift isolation cell. This mise en abyme was to be the designated area for the guilty objects that had amassed our blame and deserved punishment: the victim's victim. Here, an absurd gathering of a can, a jar and a box, dutifully spent the morning banished to the corner in order to assume their guilt and 'lose their negative characteristics'. Patients and personnel were invited to bring their own guilty object to punish for a chosen amount of time.

The middle of the week was marked by the opening of an indoor plant garden centre where people were invited to choose a plant to care for. The brightly coloured houseplants were joyful on a sensory level, but also represented a complete dependence on the comprehension and support of others. Next, came the massage parlour. Where the cell had once been a feared terminus of deprivation, it was now an exclusive site for physical treatment of the utmost indulgence, complete with a sign-up sheet.



On Friday, the cell became a meditation centre, a refuge lined with cushions, where the mental journey to solitude was restored as a peaceful one based on self-will rather than a lonely ordeal dictated by another.

On the weekend, it looked outwards, becoming a cultural portal to travel to different worlds in the form of the Museum of Orientalism. Visitors could listen to a professional tour guide and look at the 19th century paintings and the exotic scenes they portrayed; windows onto faraway places.



For the final transformation, music filled the space. A grand piano materialised in the cell for a recital of *Canto Ostinato* by Simeon Ten Holt. The trancelike piece was a fitting end to the week, both melancholic and regenerative. Lost in its repetitive loops that stretch and distort time, we hear violence and beauty, like a mind in motion.

In the isolation cell, stripped back down to its clinical origins, the piece echoed as a redemptive tribute to all the experiences it had inflicted on its inhabitants. In contrast to the frigid isolation chamber, Aëgerter's *LEVIATHAN* is a place of healing and humanity. It's a site of negotiation, where the ambivalences and contradictions of solitary confinement are made visible and come into contact with possible alternatives.



A series of photographs and a documentary video-installation of the project are currently on show as part of the exhibition *De Maakbare Mens*, Dolhuys Museum Haarlem, on view until the 10th of March 2017. Aëgerter has also made an artist's book using photographs of the patients and personnel, created when the isolation cell was transformed into an indoor plant centre, entitled *MEER VREUGDE MET KAMERPLANTEN* (More Joy With Indoor plants). A day-by-day documentation of the project can be found at [leviathan-degeopendeisoleer cel.blogspot.nl](http://leviathan-degeopendeisoleer cel.blogspot.nl) (currently only available in Dutch).

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