



## **\*Dooltocht/A desperate quest to find a base for hope.<sup>2</sup>**

### **Introduction to my work.**

*'Dooltocht\*/A desperate quest to find a base for hope' shows that it is possible to be uncompromising in connecting art with society. Instead of following the rhythm of the art market, Dietvorst follows the rhythm of life itself: it is in that collective life that art manifests itself best in her opinion.<sup>3</sup>*

COVID-19 is the biggest global event—and challenge—of our lifetimes. We have lost a part of our dearest human habits, sharing a meal, a hug, spending close time together. We have to find new ways to connect, love and be creative.

In these new life we, not only artists, are challenged to make change possible. We will have to reach out for other values to create, connect and share. We have to use other values than profit, market value and the individual artistry.

How can artists in the present day create something radical that offers alternative offerings for a world dominated by capitalism, inequality and an ecological/ethical crisis?

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<sup>1</sup> View from the exposition \*Dooltocht in the Muhka

<sup>2</sup> The title of my most recent retrospective exhibition in the Muhka Antwerp.

<sup>3</sup> Metropolis M, Alan Quireyns.  
[metropolism.com/nl/reviews/40655\\_els\\_dietvorst\\_in\\_het\\_m\\_hka](https://metropolism.com/nl/reviews/40655_els_dietvorst_in_het_m_hka)

Which skills do we need? How do we connect? Which tools do we use? Which rituals would help us? Which are the necessary energizers or drivers?

*"Dietvorst shows us that we are social beings and should hold on to our individuality less. Her way of working creates openness and possibilities for better communication. It creates opportunities to enter into dialogue and to restore our connection with each other."*<sup>4</sup>

I can only answer these questions from my own personal experience, from my own artistic research and my recent and past artprojects. Also my experience in the lockdown during the Covid 19 situation gave me new insides and new paths for experiment.

It is sure we will have to use a more ecological approach to make energies possible. Ecological means here use fluidity, plasticity and serendipity. Ecological means hope, hope lies in imperfection, in accepting fragility and stepping fearless into new artistic challenges. By using radical empathy we create a humus to connect, combine and transform!

Beuys's idea of the 'social sculpture' is a continuing inspiration:

*'...a total work of art is only possible in the context of the whole of society. Everyone will be a necessary co-creator of a social architecture, and, so long as anyone cannot participate, the ideal form of democracy has not been reached. Whether people are artists, assemblers of machines or nurses, it is a matter of participating in the whole.'*<sup>5</sup>

## **1.Radical empathy. Expressing a primal social gesture.**

*"Dietvorst is sensitive to what presents itself. Her work is about human vulnerability. "Living is learning to deal with beauty and tragedy," she knows. "That is something that binds us and that we can talk about."*<sup>6</sup>

Most of the questions I get about my work is but how do you connect with somebody, how do you create a base to work together?

Radical empathy or the genuine process of dealing with and bridging differences is one of my workmotto's. By finding a base that connects all, it could be a loss, sharing a meal or sitting around a tree, I will always create a comfortable space to share and give all the opportunity to connect.

Art and life are integral for me. Deeper, I see art as a poetic and vital force that creates different dynamics, as a social process, a catalyst that links individuals from different backgrounds and origins. Art that deals directly with social contradictions, whether by physical implication, or through more community involvement.

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<sup>4</sup> Indra Devriendt in Jegens and Tevens.

<https://jegensentevens.nl/2020/02/kunst-als-ontmoetingsplaats/>

<sup>5</sup> Beuys in an interview with G.Jabbe, 1972.

<https://theoria.art-zoo.com/not-just-a-few-are-called-but-everyone-joseph-beuys/>

<sup>6</sup> Indra Devriendt in Jegens and Tevens.

<https://jegensentevens.nl/2020/02/kunst-als-ontmoetingsplaats/>

Art is the energy of human beings in dialogue with one another. In the spirit of Beuys, the group happening – the collective, the heat and the warmth of the people together – is how art occurs, is the art process, is the art product in action.

Applying radical empathy means we have to fundamentally change our way of thinking from judgmental to accepting, in an attempt to more authentically connect with ourselves and others. We have to create bases and creation centers where this is possible, where communities can meet artists and visa versa. Creation centers, where without pressure of production, long years of collaboration is assured.

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<sup>7</sup> Ur, c'est de la Babylone. Installation Muhka museum

## 2. Towards an ecological practice. Fluidity/plasticity.

*"Through her aesthetic work, Els Dietvorst invites us to rethink and change our fundamental ethical attitudes in a world that is imploding ecologically and socially. Here I use "ecological" in the broad sense of the word."<sup>8</sup>*

Contemporary social issues such as migration, racism and, more recently environmental issues, remain a source of inspiration for my work. Then there are the more universal themes such as the human condition, anxiety, alienation and destruction. Fear is one of the major themes of this century. Fear of the other, fear of communication, fear of fear, which thus involve all the feelings that go with it: individualism, escape, desire, mental and ethical issues.

I believe in 'communicative action' where social interactions are coordinated not through the egocentric calculations of success of every individual but through the co-operative achievements of understanding among participants.

You could say my practice is ecological because it enables movements and flows. It relates directly with his environment and with the relation of living organisms to and with their physical surroundings.

I not only work in the wildness, 'wilderness'(in and with nature), I also make wilderness my methodology to explore the potential of fresh ideas and new knowledge.

My wilderness is an open field, without fences and borders, without judgements, free and responsive, where past, present and future are one.

*Pistoletti used to say 'First of all, in order to understand this place you need to completely forget what you think art is, you need to completely erase all your ideas about art. The ideas about art you have held thus far are not relevant.'*

In all my art projects the notion of time is an important issue. In every participation, collaboration with the other you can grasp the full layers if you can give yourself time to connect with the other. If you take time to get lost, or accept failure, to be a *dérive*. Artistically it is a process that allows you to make mistakes and learn from them.

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<sup>8</sup> The Beauty is in the wild, Rodrigo Monteiro. Text for Muhka catalogue.



### 3. Intuition. Inspiration. Transformation.

*"Els Dietvorst tries to stimulate a new ethical consciousness, a form of spirituality in which man does not dominate our society, but is a small link in mysterious nature. In that view, the same person then has the opportunity to transcend his physical and sensory experiences by living less rationally and more intuitively."*<sup>9</sup>

Experiment, primal intuition and dialogue are the foundations of my work. I have been active in recent years in various disciplines: performance, installations, film, drawings and sculptures.

I work very intuitively. The final artwork is never the end product, the whole process is the artwork. To be able to create these processes, these 'passageways' the time and space needed is taken. Processes are based on intuition, creation and transformation, it is an ongoing energy of order and chaos. A direct connection with your close environment and your inner soul.

As it was in the time of the lockdown, where I went back to a state of natural simplicity, a certain harmony and a direct relation with what was close. My direct surroundings were an infinite inspiration for creation. As it was sometimes wood, the wind, a stone, a smile.

I rediscovered the power of everyday rituals and repetition. I had the feeling it linked me back to ancestors and ancient times. To a life that was simple and fulfilling.

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<sup>9</sup> Kunst werkt, Els Dietvorst  
<https://www.kunstwerkt.be/els-dietvorst>

Man is fulfilled only when unseparated from his surroundings.  
*"At a certain level men can penetrate to the eternal origins of things."*<sup>10</sup>

Unnoticed things makes things visible. Be a listening ear, don't judge, be humble. Taking time is important to make an inner and an outer relation with something, somebody.

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Steiner. Theory of cognition.



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Nomads and non-places.

**ACM, the icon of today's society.**

Work-in-progress 2008-2021.

*"Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day's refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously: he collects like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of industry. This description is one extended metaphor for the poetic method, as Baudelaire practiced it. Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse." <sup>12</sup>*

On every occasion and when I have to speak in public I always show the video of ACM, called 'A walk with ACM.'(link attached) This video is more than ever a mirror of our society and shows a vulnerable man who is doing nothing wrong except re-cycling all we throw away but still he is hunted and chased away everywhere.

*ACM, is the icon of our modern society. Through his eyes we discover our world differently.*

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<sup>11</sup> Photo Dirk Braeckman, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin 1973 : 73–80 )

ACM was a visionair, a great philosopher and is for me the metaphor of our Antropocene society. He is a survivor, an anti-consumerist, a true transcendentalist. He makes us reflect on the most essential things in life. Like an urban hunter-gatherer, he gathers his own food, usually discounted food from supermarkets, and makes his own clothing from what we leave behind at Oxfam clothing bins. He uses the water of the canal *'... comme un homme prend la liberte de boire l'eau de la canal pendant cinq ans comme un pigeon pour ne pas se sentir obliger de payer son eau sans source legale de revenus'*.<sup>13</sup> He knows the tricks to survive in a society who is more and more aggressive to anything that doesn't fit in. To survive he has to dress himself in 'fools clothes' so he doesn't get beaten up.

I followed ACM for over 5 years and a lot of the problems in society are still unsolved. Six years ago he disappeared.

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<sup>13</sup> Letter form ACM, 2014.



## Food, shelter, clothing and Fuel

Are the necessities of life for man.<sup>14</sup>

*'I had tree chairs in my house,  
one for solitude,  
two for friendship,  
three for society.'*<sup>15</sup>

I ran into ACM in 2007 on one of my many walks along the Anderlecht / Charleroi canal. The border at the end of the city of Brussels, the beginning of a 'no man's land', industrial abandoned buildings, vegetable gardens, nature taking over, the city doing nothing. The place where, as an artist, felt good, because there is a lot to gather. But others also look for 'refuge': homeless people, shepherds, lost people, photography students, graffiti artists, drug addicts, first lovers, party freeks, nature watchers.

Or those like ACM, who want to flee society temporarily, without being declared a fool.

It was late winter and a man was sleeping in an abandoned "bunker". I asked him if he needed anything; he said, "...give me what you can give." It was January 2007. Since then I have continued to visit him, with food, with clothes, with whatever he needed. It was clear

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<sup>14</sup> Walden, Henry David Thoreau, 1854

<sup>15</sup> Walden, Henry David Thoreau, 1854

from the beginning that ACM, his nickname for Art-Coeur-Merci, was an atypical homeless person; well-read and philosophizing, strong and fragile. I continued to visit him for a year, without a camera, with interest.

When we decided with Firefly<sup>16</sup>, to do a project around the "N6-the stone road"<sup>17</sup> I decided to ask ACM if I could make a film about him. When I visited him he had disappeared, his bunker had burned down and I kept everything I could recover, drawings, writings, objects. With these objects and in the place where he lived I shot the fiction film 'As long as the blackbird lives'. The film creates an atmosphere of the environment in which ACM lived, but also of its mental state, which was very fragile due to the long loneliness. The ideas of Henry David Thoreau and his book Walden<sup>18</sup> were, and is, a source of inspiration. Thoreau decided to withdraw from society, build his own house and live from nature, about his experiences of these two years he wrote the book Walden.

"Everybody is entitled to different lives"<sup>19</sup>, said Arthur Rimbaud. In the video projects 'The return of the swallows', 'Song for the price of a goat', 'As long as the Blackbird sings' I have always been fascinated by people who radically change their lives, knock it over and end up in the periphery. Often they are forced out of necessity or it happens by a coincidence. What drives them and how do they deal with their new life. How do they survive?

ACM has always looked for 'non-places'<sup>20</sup> in the public space that were ruins and were completely taken over by nature. He didn't want to stand in the way of anyone or be a burden to his environment. Yet he was chased away everywhere and everything flattened was destroyed and closed off. Our public space comes close to the American model where all public space is privatized and there are no escape routes for people like ACM.

After I finished my film I looked everywhere for ACM. Accidentally I came across him. He claimed a deserted building and was using a wall for shelter and drawing experiments. They allowed him for a while. But suddenly he had to leave. Things had to be cleaned up. In the second film 'A walk with ACM/1' I visited with him all his hosted places and listen to his reflections.

In a second film 'A walk with ACM/2' we work together on drawings and writings. But this is not an easy task. One day he shows up, the next day he doesn't. But I wanted to make this

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<sup>16</sup> Firefly was founded in Brussels by Els Dietvorst and Orla Barry in 2000 and ran till 2010. Firefly was a real sanctuary for artists. In collaboration with other partners, artists at Firefly were given the space and especially the time to create. For each project Firefly putted together an occasional collective of artists from different disciplines and backgrounds. Multimedia, cross-disciplinary and process-based collaboration are the keywords here.

<sup>17</sup> The Stone Road, Fireflyprojects  
<http://www.kunstenfestivaldesarts.be/en/archive/detail/the-stone-road-2>

<sup>18</sup> **Walden**, first published in 1854 as **Walden; or, Life in the Woods**) is a book by American [transcendentalist](#) writer [Henry David Thoreau](#). The text is a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings. The work is part personal declaration of independence, [social experiment](#), voyage of spiritual discovery, [satire](#), and—to some degree—a manual for self-reliance.<sup>[2]</sup>

<sup>19</sup> A season in hell, Arthur Rimbaud

<sup>20</sup> Non-place is a neologism coined by French anthropologist Marc Augé to refer to anthropological temporary places where people remain anonymous and which are not important enough to be seen as "places".

film, because through his eyes I discovered another world. A world which exists outside 'our' society.

We drew, walked and ate together for a week. This shared experience is turned into the monologue '*I'm going to my chickens*', performed by Dirk Roofthoof<sup>21</sup>.

*"I once found a black man staring,  
sitting against a tree.*

*He owned nothing had put his hut together with branches he had found,  
it was just big enough for him to lie in with his tall body  
it was under a plum tree.*

*There was an apple tree too and some onion plants,  
all overgrown with brambles and thorns,  
a bit of nature imprisoned amongst the concrete.*

*In the past I was bold enough to collect apples and pick plums,  
not any more, the fruit falls and rots, no one cares a jot.*

*What do I want to say,  
listen he says."<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> MEMENTO MORI! IROM OTNEMEM(2017-2020) *Memento Mori* brings together two theater monologues: *I'm going to my chickens* and *Driftwood*. After a series of encounters with the Brussels homeless person 'ACM', Els Dietvorst wrote *Ik ga naar mijn kippen* (I'm going to my chickens). The text was a sequel to three documentaries she made about the life of this philosopher-drifter and his struggle for a dignified existence. Two years later, when Dietvorst was working on one of her Skull sculptures for the Moscow Biennale, her brother lay dying. This inspired her to write *Driftwood*, a text about the fragility of life and dealing with death. The first one is performed by Dirk Roofthoof, the second by Aurelie Di Marino.

<sup>22</sup> Piece out of I am going to my chickens, monologue for Dirk Roofthoof



**“Nothing is as it is. Nothing is certain. Nothing remains and everything changes.”**

*“... Yet there are certitudes; we all have a father, mother, grandfather and grandmother. ACM would like to begin by drawing up our family tree. Because we know it and it is universal. All the rest is unknown and makes him uncertain. He himself works day and night on collages and drawings. He calls them letters, letters to the outside world, letters to children he no longer sees, letters to a woman. A world where dialogue is impossible. Mostly we ate something together and I proposed him different working possibilities. I brought him drawings and he brings me back 'letters'. Every day he gives me another task. I had to buy a guitare, a bible, stamps and matches. When the intensity of our cooperation was to high, he did not show up. Never did I experience art, living and surviving so closely entwined.”<sup>23</sup>*

His new life story took an interesting, Kafkaian, turn. In 2012 he lives in a homeless shelter for men. The winters were to cold, he said. I turned myself in. He now voluntarily worked for 'Les Petits Riens' to empty houses of people who can no longer pay their rent/credit. He follows computer and language courses, is looking for a job, and wants to build his own site with poems and photos.

Can you escape your fate or do you take control of your own life?

Susan Sontag says *“It has to do with reinventing yourself, with the idea that you can become a different person, change your life, be reborn. It is very European to think that you can never escape your past.”*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Els Dietvorst in Time is a book, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Sontag , interview in

He wants to return to Cameroon within 10 years to unite with his forefathers: "... c'est mon but final,... mon point final est au Cameroun, berceau de nos ancêtres."<sup>25</sup>

*"Els, a pigeon reassures me in Saint Gilles by showing me his nest in the shadow of the crown of a tree. He claims the good before the Lord trades his home on earth. Hell will burst as a result of the behavior of human beings who have time to cause the destruction of another's nest. The pigeons are the martyrs of the cause before Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth in this struggle for life between man and animal."<sup>26</sup>*

The story of ACM is unfinished. In 2014 he sends me this message:

*"Els, I just found out that I'm on the RED list of hosting institutions. If you know how to get a cheap night's sleep, give a sign."<sup>27</sup>*

And the day after:

*"Hotel de la France, Southstation, 7.52 in the morning, I slept well."<sup>28</sup>*

This was the last sign of ACM. It is September 2014.



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<sup>25</sup> Letter of ACM, 2010

<sup>26</sup> Textmessage of ACM, 2014

<sup>27</sup> "Els, je viens d'apprendre que je suis sur la liste ROUGE des institutions d'hébergement. Si tu sais comment dormir une nuit pas cher, fais signe." Textmessage from ACM.

<sup>28</sup> Last textmessage from ACM.

<sup>29</sup> ACM's house behind my garden in the winter

## ACM lost and found.(\*)

*"His name was ACM, Art Coeur merci, Art Heart Thank You.  
He carried his suffering with pride  
He refused to make any judgements  
He walked our roads, shared his thoughts  
Recycled what we thought was waste*

*The world around him didn't understand  
Hiding behind arrogance and nihilism  
wanted to frame him  
wanted to put him in a context to be able to judge*

*He said the pressure of globalization is changing us  
why are we in such a desperate haste to succeed  
it sounds like a mantra.  
Nobody wanted to listen  
He repeats.  
They run away.*

*They are loosing rootlessness.  
He is gaining freedom.*

*6 years ago  
He disappeared.  
Society spitted him out,  
burried him under bounderies and judgements and arrogance."<sup>30</sup>*

12 september 2019, I am invited by Sara de Roo for 'Lesfest' in the conservatorium of Antwerp to give a masterclass for drama and word students. I offered them different 'engaging' possibilities to work around and when I shared my story of ACM, they immediately said we want to go and look for him!

We organized our classroom as an activist bunker, we took carboard from the street asked for markers and gaffa and made colour copies, with pictures from ACM.

We gathered our words and his words and started walking to the places I saw him last.

On every note we put a date and a time and a place where he could meet me.

*"Gare du midi  
17/09  
Track 22  
16h"*

That day September 17<sup>th</sup> he didn't turn up.

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<sup>30</sup> Els Dietvorst, text for Lesvest.



But we made a small human revolution. We used poetry not boundaries. We used beauty no judgements. We used humbleness no arrogance.

We used art as a lifebuoy.

We made connection with the world and with ourselves. And more important, we felt what he felt, how society treats a man that bends the rules to survive.

We created a 'small human gesture' built on hope, between us, in the sharing, in the art we made, in the meals we shared, in the warmth we felt.

Artists can play a big role in these **Small gestures movements**.

As Susanne Sontag says about directing "Waiting for Godot" In Sarajevo during the war.

*"Waiting for Godot opened with 12 candles on the stage on August 17<sup>th</sup>. Many people would turn away and I think it was during the long tragic silence of Vladimir and Estragon which follows the messengers announcement Mr Godot is not coming today but will surely come tomorrow that my eyes began to sting with tears. No one in the audience made a sound. The only sound were the ones that were coming from outside the theatre: a UN personel truc thundering down the street and the crack of sniper fire."*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Susan Sontag in an interview.

Until now the project is not finished for me and the urgency to create a space where people like ACM can exist is more than ever necessary.

In my next solo exhibition in Brussel, Centrale for contemporary art, October 20102, ACM will be the man subject.



**ACM/the whole story, process films.**

A walk with ACM/1, 2009.

ACM trilogy, 2011.

ACM, lost and found\*, 2019.

**ACM/the whole story, presentation moments.**

**2009**

'A WALK WITH ACM': PREMIERED IN KUNSTENFESTIVALDESARTS, BRUSSELS MAY 2009.

'AS LONG AS THE BLACKBIRD SINGS', KUNSTENFESTIVALDESARTS, ARGOS, BRUSSELS, VIENNA.

**2011**

ART-COEUR –MERC'I', TIME IS A BOOK, GHENT.

ART-COEUR –MERC'I', SOLO-EXPOSITION IN MUSEUM GUISLAIN, GHENT, NOVEMBER 2011.

ART-COEUR –MERC'I', PERFORMANCE&VIDEO, KAAITHEATRE, KUNSTENFESTIVALDESARTS, BRUSSELS, MAY 2014

'ART-COEUR –MERC'I', PERFORMANCE&VIDEO, THEATRE FRASCATI, AMSTERDAM, JANUARY

**2014**

'I'M GOING TO MY CHICKENS, MONOLOGUE FOR DIRK ROOFTHOFT. THEATRE MONOLOGUE PERFORMED AS MEMENTO MORI DURING THE YEAR 2018-2012 IN KAAITHEATRE BRUSSELS AND ON TOUR IN FLANDERS.

**2019**

TIME IS A BOOK IS TIME. MASTERCLASS IN THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS.

**2021**

DE CENTRALE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART BRUSSELS