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## REALITY, artistic research on 'losing grip on reality'

17-10-2019 | [Tessa Smorenburg](#)

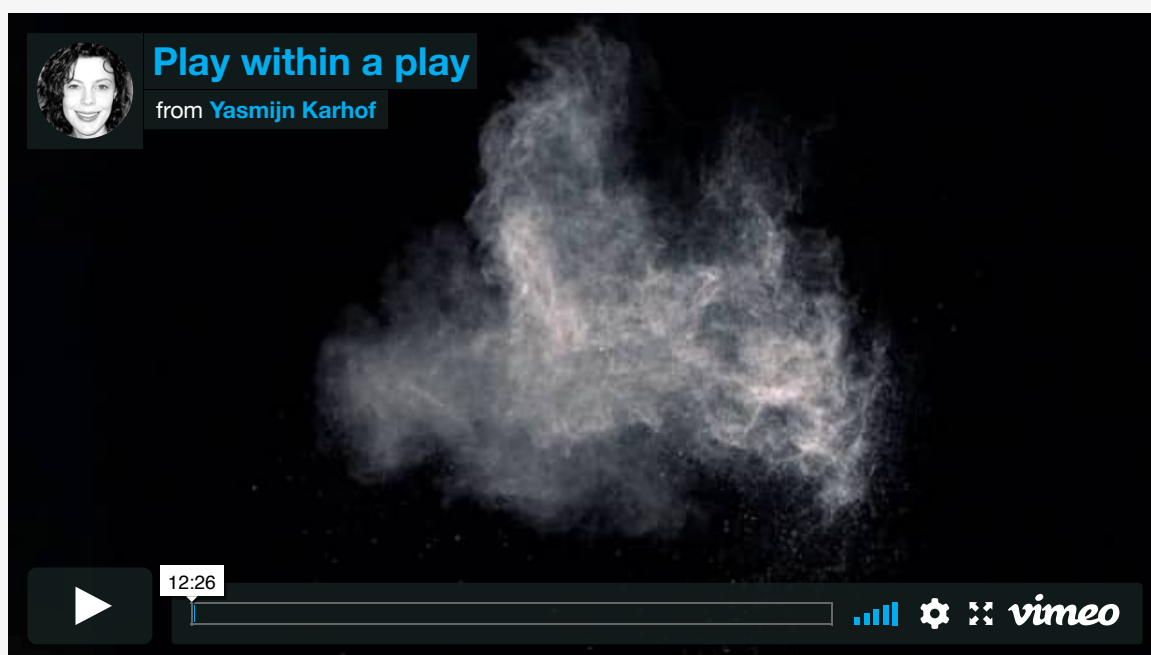
In 2016, the Dutch artist Yasmijn Karhof spent three months as artist-in-residence in the psychiatric ward at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn NYC (USA). Integral to her artistic practice is the expression of the subjective experience of reality in a visual context.

During her research in the hospital she was intrigued by how the concept of 'losing grip on reality' is central in everyone's narrative -both patients and hospital staff alike- and is perceived in many different ways. The outcome of her research, entitled *Reality* is currently being exhibited (18 September – 3 November) at the Beautiful Distress House in Amsterdam

(NL).

### Introducing Karhof's practice

Yasmijn Karhof's (1974) short films endeavour to represent the subjective interpretation of reality, and to demonstrate how imagination mediates in the process of our understanding of the material world. Specifically, Karhof attempts to visualize the concept of the inner world of her (human) subjects through a diversity of artistic mediums, like a visual poem, her process guides the viewer through a visceral experience. For example the opening fragment of her short film *Play within in a Play* (2014) draws the viewer in with what appears to be an iconic image of the moon, but as the camera slowly zooms out this supposed reality is obliterated by the realization that the image is nothing more than a light reflection in an everyday coffee cup. A new scene is revealed, a man in a suit drinking a cup of coffee, a new story unravels and the viewer is forced to reinvent and to comply with this new narrative. The archetypal becomes the mundane and our perception of reality is challenged. The film sequence through the power of metaphor shows the ambiguity one encounters when trying to understand another person, their inner world remains obscured, and any insight remains a subjective interpretation due to the impossibility of direct contact with the subjects world of thought.



*Play within in a Play (Yasmijn Karhof, 2014)*

## The perception of Art

The artist-in-residence program at Kings County Hospital is initiated by the foundation *Beautiful Distress* in the Netherlands. This foundation, which was founded in 2014, strives to create awareness and acceptance in society for the mentally ill through the medium of arts projects. Their current projects include the artist-in-residence programs in New York (USA) and a similar program in Daigo (Japan). The insights gained through the research during these programs are presented as a work of art in an exhibition, thus encouraging interdisciplinary scrutiny and exchange of ideas between the domains of the Art and care. To quote professor Andries Baart, visiting Professor at the Department Psychiatry at the University Medical Center in Utrecht (NL) and author of *The theory of presence* (2001), “The autonomous craftsmanship of the artist is open-minded and examined, it is based on a receptive, tentative, alternating, imagining and harmonious way of perceiving (Perceiving, an Art ?!, 2018)”. The application of this research will hopefully contribute to a more perceptive approach and understanding of psychiatric care.

## Artistic research in a psychiatric hospital

Integral to her artistic practice is the expression of the subjective experience of reality in a visual context. Foremost, she is intrigued with how emotions, such as fear and desire, affect and reshape one's perception of reality. Karhof explains that in extension of her artistic practice, the invitation for this artist-in-residence in the psychiatric ward of the King County Hospital was an opportunity to study these concepts from a different angle. In a mental institution reality is an unstable definition where what commonly is considered a 'normal' reality has often been replaced by a substitute. During her meetings with patients and staff, she explores the diversity of realities present and which are central to the narrative in psychiatric hospital culture. Even though it is not possible to grasp a single instant or

moment when 'losing grip on reality' happens, Karhof rather expresses it in her art as a sliding scale.



*Reality is a fingerprint ( Yasmijn Karhof, 2017)*

The bodily experience of *Reality*

The exhibition *Reality* consists of several works. Two of these works are on show in the exhibition space at the foundation Beautiful Distress House in Amsterdam. The exhibition space is presented as a spacious wooden shed, darkened by blacked out skylight windows. Bulbs hanging ominously from the ceiling cast harsh lighting on the scene. This décor recreates the raw and rough psychic landscape suitable to the subject matter. On first entering the exhibition space one is confronted with an eight meter horizontal long tapestry, entitled *Reality is a fingerprint* (2017), depicting people standing in the courtyard of the King County Hospital. As if in a protest, they carry in their hands cardboard signs with quotes retrieved from Karhof's research, such as "Discipline born from desperation", "Back to my regular self again" and "Have fun". Each subject engages the viewer with direct eye contact giving the sense of immediate and frightening presence of being. The courtyard is enormous, and accordingly the image presented is formed by over 90 pictures, edited in photomontage and displayed next to each other in a panoramic setting.





*Reality* (Yasmijn Karhof, 2019)

### Opening up on reality

In the second work of art the viewer can wander through an audiovisual installation, entitled *Reality* (2019), consisting of life-size cyan-blue images of patients and staff printed onto hospital sheets. Yasmijn Karhof explains: “The persons are photographed in a laying position. In this way the play of gravity on the subject is optically distorted, subtly seen in the small details such as the fall of the clothing, accessories and hair”. This effect is further emphasized by the audio aspect of the installation, a montage of recordings of interviews made in the psychiatric hospital, by both patients and hospital staff alike. These testimonials openly elaborate on the various realities they are experiencing while ‘losing grip’. Karhof concludes: “Above all, I wanted to give a voice to the patients in this mental institution. In the images, as well in the audio, care-givers and patients are not introduced by their role in the scene, which gives them a certain anonymity”. In the first instance the voices speaking in this collage of monologues present themselves as an open conversation but on closer analysis one realizes that the voices fail to interact with one another, thus -visually, as well as bodily- creating a feeling of isolation and intimidation. By extracting words from a medical discourse the context of the hospital is bridged in their stories.

***Scène from Reality:*** “It’s a terrible thing when you have a concept of

*reality that's not real. I went into a Duane Reade (New York's Pharmacy chain) and I perceive to take things off the shelf and put in my basket because I felt that my husband to be bought the Duane Reade for me and he's giving it to me as a wedding gift. So this is my Duane Reade, he gave me. So everything in Duane Reade belongs to me.*

*So I began to take things off the shelf and put them in my basket because they were my things. Then they called the police because I had done that. I really thought it was real, I really thought my fiancé bought me Duane Reade.”*

These frank and honest testimonials given by the patients and hospital staff at the psychiatric ward of King County Hospital in Brooklyn NYC are captured in *Reality* by Yasmijn Karhof and offer us insights into the process of

'losing grip on reality'. By experiencing this artwork, the viewer becomes part of the intriguing practice of mental institutions. Karhof introduces us to a model of fuzzy probability, albeit on a corporeal level, which hopefully affords a better understanding of psychic vulnerability than would philosophical exactness. Finally and perhaps ironically, her chosen title serves to demonstrate the phenomenological complexity and the monumental linguistic failure to adequately describe such a subjective, multifaceted and moving-target subject in a single word; *Reality*.

**Yasmijn Karhof** (1974) lives and works in Amsterdam (NL). In 2000 she graduated at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam (NL). Her studies included a stay at The Cooper Union School of Art in New York (US), and in 2005 she completed her residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam (NL). In 2007 she lived and worked in Japan for six months. As a multimedia artist, she uses photography, film, performance and installations in various combinations.

The Exhibition *Reality* is from sept 18 to nov 3 2019 at

Beautiful Distress House

Ms. van Riemsdijkweg 41A, Amsterdam (NL)

[www.beautifuldistress.org](http://www.beautifuldistress.org)

## About the author: Tessa Smorenburg



*Tessa Smorenburg (1987) graduated as a master in Ethics of Care and Policy at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht (NL) in 2015. She now cooperates with artists, assuming the role of journalist or project manager, and makes use of her knowledge and experience in the field of ethics of care to provide perspective. As a sociotherapist she worked in direct contact with patients in psychiatric clinics. In her own artistic endeavors, like the collages that are her trade, she is intrigued by issues of gender and examines her position in society from a female perspective.*

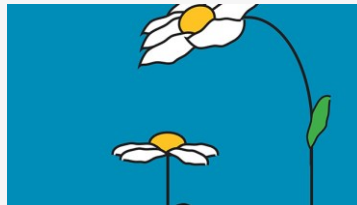
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