

Caravan of Dreams

Four essays written on the hoof

Andy Barrett

1. What to do with the elephants?



I am in Het Hoge Heem, a house for the elderly in Uithoorn. It's a semi state run place, one of 27 in the region. An older lady has just gone behind a sheet rigged up on some pole to make a shadow puppet theatre screen. She is holding an elephant shadow puppet, which presumably she made in one of the two earlier workshops held here. She is accompanied

by a primary age child from a local school who also has an elephant. It's national puppetry day here in the Netherlands. And also Volunteers Day. There were some folk back at base, where Franz – puppeteer in chief - lives and where we had lunch, from the pharmaceutical company Bayer, who were putting in their four hours of voluntary service a year in return for a certificate and a 20% off voucher at some department store or another. Some of the puppets they helped with, based, I think, on designs from some of the older people, are being used in this workshop where the young and the old are practising using the puppets behind a large screen for the first time.

Joanne Oussoren, from Droomtheater reads *The Carnival of Animals* while Saint Saens plays. A local politician is also holding an elephant but hasn't had a go yet. She may have lost her post in the regional(?) government on Wednesday but deals are being made as we speak and she may be welcomed back in. The state is in retreat she tells me. It's the same in the U.K. I tell her. Probably worse. (Definitely worse). And there doesn't seem to be much heard in the way of protest. The same here, she says; it's strange. Where's the revolution? Hope she gets back in.

The house where Franz, who is running this project, *Carnaval der Dieren*, lives is part of a Central Housing project; one of around one hundred in the country. Franz moved here 24 years ago, about a year after it was opened. He got lucky. First in a one bed apartment and then moving to a two bed apartment. There are fifteen in all; of various sizes. And there is – most importantly – a large communal room. When he was first here people ate together twice a week; now it's once a month. There's a rota for looking after the chickens, for clearing up the communal room; which is used mainly now for the birthday parties of those that live here, full of relatives rather than housemates (or whatever the collective term for such a thing is). If you ever earn over thirty three thousand euros you have to leave. Many haven't. When a space becomes free they have a meal and invite people to be communal and sociable and make their case. Some struggle.

Het Hoge Heem has a waiting list. The communal room is large and airy and light and Eric, the activities organiser, is overseeing today's activity. There are around 130 rooms here. But many of the activities are not well attended. Today there are really only a handful of older people joining in, more women than men, (one looks frighteningly like Ann Widdecombe; another has

wonderful shoes). By the time people arrive here, Eric tells me, they have spent five or six years retreating into themselves, learning isolation and loneliness; like many (most?) older people do.

Next Friday there will be one more workshop and then, on the Sunday a performance complete with a six piece brass band. The 'political woman' as she's called, will help to rewrite the story to make it more topical. There is talk about the swans of Uithoorn but nobody is quite sure what to do with the elephants. This project has been crowd funded.

Twenty years ago, when Joanne set up Droomtheater, she was writing plays about Freudian cases; now she's interested in the notion of the social dream. She works in the Feyenoord area of Rotterdam, a very multicultural area (unlike here). She has discovered that puppetry is a readily accepted artistic form that has many connections with other cultures. Droomtheater have taken work to schools and mosques. They blend live music, story-telling and puppetry. When she went to Iran she couldn't believe how many puppet companies there were.

And, as she explains, she's getting older and so is thinking about the kind of community that she wants to live in. A shared space; like the project that Franz is in, this 'special place'; rather than being alone. It is lovely. There's a river outside. The rain has stopped and the sun is coming out.

As my and my wife's parents get older; as my friends talk about setting up a communal living project, (there's some land identified in Belper, Derbyshire) I wonder if Franz is right. He thinks – hopes – that this social experiment of the sixties may return. Because of this retreating of the state. Because of the need that will arise for people to need more help. It's cheaper for a health visitor to come and visit a project with five older people in, and who get day to day support from those who live around them, he suggests, then by putting them up in these nursing homes, even with their part funding from charities. And they can have Franz's puppet shows there too.

2. Mienskip



We are in Petra's home, an old primary school here in Leeuwarden which was squatted 25 years ago. It is now a mixture of apartments and workshops and is populated by printers, artists and theatre makers. We are having lunch with a number of people and we are talking about Mienskip. It is what will define the work that is done here in 2018 when Leeuwarden takes its place as the European city of culture. Everyone was surprised it was went to Leeuwarden. It's the main city in Friesland. There was a lot of excitement when the one hundred thousandth person moved into the city. It's a rural area, where the black and white cows that filled the fields of my youth come from. Agriculture and tourism are what happens mainly. And a lot of community art work, a lot of it theatre.

Petra tells me, as we are later cycling along a path by various dykes and the lambs, that ... well gambol, that theatre is very important here because the language is very important.

Friesland is only one of two languages here; the minor one, the threatened one. Mienskip is a Frisian word. The names of the two other women who are with us – Metsje and Jildou – are Frisian names. And Friesland, I am told, has a strong sense of its own identity. And the language, the pride in it and the love of it, 'is in the veins of the people here'.

Back at Petra's we are being told more about the task in hand for the city by Metsje and Jildou; two members of the Frisian arts development organisation (Keunstwurk Frysian) who are excited and slightly anxious. They have recently finished a three year project called The Trip or DeReis 2018 which is a 'cultural venture that wishes to visualise the merits of Leeuwarden and other Frisian towns and villages, aiming to reinforce the sense of community among them'. They have gone into communities with no set ideas, have talked to people and have designed projects that respond to the desires of the people who they talk to. They have helped a village make a new footpath through the woods so that they don't have to walk along a main road with the traffic any more. They are passionate about this 'method'.

This is what will define their year of European Capital of Culture. It's a bid built on community art. It's defining word is Mienskip. It means sense of community. And although it is a Frisian word now, Metsje explains, the 'people in the Hague know it too'. The local square, a new one, only two years old, was packed when the result was read out and broadcast live. They had a one in three chance. The people who announced the decision opened an envelope; like the Oscars, like the Olympics. And now the work begins. Forty one projects will be run in 2018. But this is no ordinary Mienskip. This is Open (not the right spelling, it's a word that means Open, it sounds like Eepen) Mienskip; a desire to share this community feeling with others; and not to internalise it, to look inwards.

We go off to a new art gallery sitting at the head of this new square. Petra is a conceptual artist, working as CP Berbee. She ran a series of projects with different groups around the development of the square. The last one involved one thousand 'shooters' firing six thousand pellets of different coloured paint at a large portrait of a previous Queen. (I walk there again on Sunday morning and see that it is The Ministry of Justice). Permission had to be asked for such an act. There was, she tells me, 'an interesting tension' for many people as they stood in their new square with a gun firing at this previous Queen (imagine a large British stamp).

It's not free to get into the museum; it costs 10 euros, but in the NL you can buy a pass for around 40 – 50 E which will get you into any museum for a year. We meet two more artists there, Tilly and Gerard. They are building a collection of one litre jars of water; from Friesland, from the Netherlands, from Europe and further afar. People can gather it wherever they find it and let them have it. They want to get, I think, around 1500 jars. The jars are many colours but there is a lot of green. These are the dummy jars that they have filled to complete the piece; jars that they still need people to fill for them. Some is rainwater found from puddles in a local street; some from the many dykes; there is a little bit from the Ganges. It will end up in a university of water which is soon to open. There is a lot of water here. We had to drive across a lot of it on our way.

(We went wrong once or twice as roads were closed off around Schipol airport. Obama and Putin and all of the others are in Amsterdam for a Nuclear Industry summit. Apparently people nearby were told that they couldn't get out on their balconies. There was a rush on groceries).

Then back to Petra's for bikes and off to see a community garden. Theo, who runs it, is retired now and spends all his time here. It has 60 volunteers; a mix of the retired, the unemployed, and 'idealists'. He is fiercely proud of it, of the fact that it hosts music and theatre events, and that out here, between a city of one hundred thousand and a village of two hundred, it is thriving and an example for other garden projects like this. 'We teach young people to grow plants and make theatre and music' he says. But they've had no luck with melons. Or aubergines. They have 'open sky theatre' every year. This is one of fifteen or so villages with an open air theatre. It's part of the culture.

Kees is with us now, from a theatre company called Buog. They are more like Hanby and Barrett / Excavate (my company, we're changing our name) than any other company I have ever met. 'How long do you rehearse for?' I ask him, wondering if, given all the similarities between us so far he will say 'three months'. 'Three months', says Kees. His latest project, in May, is for an opening of a new lock. The King is going to be in it. The actual real King. It's not a big part, and he can't say any lines, and basically they were told that he was going to come up or down the river or canal or whatever it is. But still. It's the King. In a community play.

We're having this conversation as we continue to cycle past the dykes and the lambs who are still, well ... gambolling. Paul has a bottle of water in his panier. It is from the dyke next to the café where we stopped for apple strudel. I asked Metsje and Jildou, who have a connection with the water project, if they have contributed a bottle. I chide them when they say they haven't and suggest we ask the owner of the café for a bottle now and that we all fill it up together. Which we do. It's a light brown colour.

That night, after Petra's partner has cooked us a delicious meal, we go to a bar and talk again about the excitement of this city and this region being chosen as the European City of Culture. I ask Petra if there is a hope, an expectation, of local artists producing much of the work. After all it's about Mienskip. She says that she hopes there is; but that a project as large as this in a place as small as this also has the potential to cause division as people ask who is doing what and why aren't they being involved. I hope they all are. The work they do that we were shown was fascinating. It's a lovely place. I recommend visiting. And 2018 wouldn't be a bad time to come.

3. There is a yellow gas station, there is a pink gas station.

You know those petrol stations that used to sit empty on the side of the road until the hand car wash guys moved in? Well there are two here in north Amsterdam, either side of a road that has vanished somewhere down below. One is pink and one is yellow. As in totally pink and totally yellow. The pink one is closed today, Sunday. It's a home now to some kind of musicians collective. The yellow one belongs to Hot Mama Hot, a creative collective that has been going since 2000. Originally visual artists they branched into areas of specialism; one a cook, one an interior designer and so on. They started making installations for festivals, and providing food as well. They became well known within that scene and make a fair amount of money out of it. When they're not doing it they're doing this. Running all sorts of projects in their yellow petrol station, or gas station as Maikke, the woman who has taken us here, calls it. It sounds better.

Yorick (not sure if this is how you spell it alas) is here on his own now (until his partner and two month old daughter arrive) and is telling us of some of the things they get up to. Most of

it involves the local kids. Like holding a monthly meal which is cooked by children with the help of a guest chef.



This gas station (there, I've said it) is on the border of a group of old Dutch houses from the twenties which are lived in by a pretty prosperous crowd, and a neighbourhood that is not. One of the things that he enjoys most about the work is the way that, through the children bringing their parents along, different social classes interact.

The project was funded by the housing schemes that operate around here, by the government, and by Shell. Now the local government have decided that Hot Mama Hot should pay rent. For these disused buildings that weren't demolished by this same government when the highway was lowered because to keep them was cheaper. The disused buildings which are now used every day by the local children. And staffed by people who are paid, not by the local government but by Hot Mama Hot. Yorick doesn't seem to mind. They make money from their festival work so they can afford it. But still.

We go back with Maikke to the North Park where the dancers and musicians are packing up and the volunteers who have been cooking food are cleaning up the pavilion. The park sits, like the yellow gas station and the pink gas station, at the centre of a number of 'disadvantaged' communities. The pavilion has been here for five years. Every Sunday there is a workshop or a performance. There are coloured umbrellas hanging from lines strung between the trees. (And today there are young children handling power tools, making clothes hooks from umbrella handles).

Maikke was a city planner and now works in the neighbourhood as part of a team running projects. The pavilion is home to around five projects a year, each based on a theme. At the moment they are running Burenbal – a Neighbours Ball. Dance ambassadors are going out to the community to invite the many different dancing groups that are out there, young and old, from the line dancers to the hip hoppers, to come together to create a new dance which will be held in the park on the 27th April. The dance will evolve from the groups that take part. It will be designed so that the audience join in, 'so there is no audience any more'.

They also have a project called Broedstraten (Incubator Streets), where artists are given reduced rent to come and work in and with the community. There is a Music Street where workshops are given and concerts held; Market Street where designers and makers share their products with things that local people make; Theatre Street where twenty three theatre makers share a building; Fashion Street; and Colour Street, originally the greyest street in the area but now being painted up. Each one of these Streets has its own project manager.

Maikke then introduces us to Christine from Rhizomatic, another arts collective who are embedded within their community. They run an experimental arts space and work with many different artists on collaborative projects, but 'they must have a strong social interest'.

Then we meet a couple who will be cooking a meal in the Living Room Restaurant on Monday; yet another project. And there's the Pop Up Restaurant space as well; an empty building that was turned into a space for would be restaurateurs to run for six weeks at a time to build up a clientele and learn the ropes.

I'm getting exhausted by it all. And I think it's the fact that I am so tired that makes me suddenly, whilst watching a woman get up on stage to join in with the dancers and seeing a real mix of people in this park dancing away to the music, feel as though I am going to burst into tears. And I think this. It's not a big thought, just a little one, but I feel it very strongly at that moment. That it doesn't take much to bring people together; and yet such a huge amount of effort is made to do the exact opposite.

And I wish that more things like this happened in the U.K. But they don't. And I think it's about space. About the idea of a shared environment on a very local level. So much of the work is funded to some degree from the housing associations who play such a large part in the way that accommodation is provided; some private, some social (which I am told is generally really good here in Amsterdam). There is an understanding that living in a street means being in that street, not just in the house on that street, hidden away inside your four walls. In the U.K so many of us live inside buildings that we buy, and which we spend our lives paying for and adding to. We may have play parks where children can ride on the swings and parents talk to each other; or some people may decide to set up some kind of informal collective activity. But it's not part of the culture. It's not expected of housing associations, or architects, or city planners. At least I don't think it is. And, of course, it should be.

On the way back to Rotterdam, as we pass Schipol Airport yet again, there are army jeeps on the side of the road and soldiers with machine guns on the bridges overhead, security for the Nuclear Industry summit that is happening here. A cavalcade goes past. A huge number of cars and motorcycles for what looks like one car with a flag on it. We pass a petrol station that is closed. This time for security. (In this context I notice that the word 'gas' does not come into my mind). The way in and the way out are blocked off with huge grey concrete slabs. It is being patrolled. Maybe one day someone will come and paint this gas station bright pink or bright yellow. Perhaps some of the children who are growing up in Koopvaardersplantsoen. Or Colour Street, as it is called, at least for the time being.

4. Common People

'Common People', the greatest social commentary pop song ever written, is playing in the van as we head towards Eindhoven looking for the HQ of Drent Dorps, which we are told is a wooden building underneath a flyover. As it turns out it's no ordinary wooden building underneath a flyover. This wooden building underneath a flyover was designed by Piet Hein Eek, who is one of Holland's most respected designers. But more of that later.

Our host today is Wikke Peters; one of the Drent Dorps Angels project. There were three of them, these angels, all women, running all kinds of arts interventions on part of a site of a huge former Philips factory, that was built in 1922. I never realised they were a Dutch company. The first time I saw the name was on my father's electric razor. They were responsible for making Eindhoven what is it today, we are told, bringing together a series of little villages into a city that employed thousands of people to make its many products here on this site. There was cheap labour. And there was sand. Which was needed for the glass. For the lightbulbs. It was when they had pretty much exhausted the lightbulb market that they branched out into other projects. This is a landscape drenched with a history of innovation.

But Philips moved out in the 90's, went to China and took the jobs with them. The local authority took over the site; then the architect Piet Hein Eek moved in (the later bit comes later); and housing associations took over the housing stock. Mr Philips was a paternalistic employer. He apparently had a fondness for Marx. (I remember seeing a statue of Marx in, I think, Vienna, standing in front of the Philips HQ, which was what my dad's electric razor was called). Eindhoven has always had a more left leaning attitude in local politics; the recent elections have returned someone with a 'socialist leaning'; whatever that means these days.

Wikke and the Drent Dorps Angels create work to deal with a range of issues on this site where new people have moved in and which is going through a major process of change and redevelopment. There were three of them; one a writer/illustrator, one a designer, and one a theatremaker/photographer. Now there is only one. After three years the Housing Association doesn't need them so much. The residents themselves have begun to initiate

projects themselves. And so Wikki is the last angel standing.

In Dutch 'angel' also means a sting; like a bee's sting. And the work they have been doing has been spiky; dealing with issues amongst the residents head on and in a really engaging and amusing manner. This place, Drent Dorps, a sector of the overall development, is an island, rows of houses surrounded by the former Philips factories that are currently in transition. The housing association who now own these properties and the tenants weren't getting on; there was a lack of communication; a sense of distrust. Renovation of the factories was about to happen and there was concern about what was going to occur. People in Drent Dorps were co-existing but they weren't connecting.

The Angels were employed by a Housing Corporation, but were allowed to keep their distance from them. They wanted (were asked?) to find out what residents wanted from their housing – which is all social here in Drent Dorps. What did these people want to happen in the area; what neighbourhood facilities did they want? Wikki mentions the word 'social cohesion', adding 'but I hate that word; it sounds official'. I suggest that it's maybe about investigating the 'soul' of the place and she agrees. It's in part a search for the identity of Drent Dorps.

The Angels, all three of them, like Charlie's, rang everybody's bell first of all, to say hello. There are around five hundred and fifty door bells here in Drent Dorps. They went out on guerrilla flower planting and graffiti excursions. They gathered thoughts on how the renovation that was happening should proceed.

Some things didn't work. Eindhoven is seen as a major design centre (more on this also later). Last year it was voted as the smartest region in the world, Wikki tells us, but I'm not sure what in exactly. But it's to do with design. The angels had a designer come in to work with residents to contribute a product for the major Design Expo that is held in Eindhoven, centred around the ex-factory site, which is known as Strijp S. But she told the residents what they should make rather than seeing what they wanted to make and they weren't having that. The Angels tried to set up committees to steer projects but they didn't really work either.

But what did work was the fact that they were here, right in the heart of the neighbourhood.

They were able to change plans as they went. To be lightfooted. And to feel able to make fools of themselves. And it's this sense of fun that attracted me most to their work. The idea of simple projects that are faintly ridiculous. So – there are issues with domestic pets; dogs, cats and, we were told by several people, with rabbits (they run about all over the place apparently; we never saw one). So the Angels held an Animal Roadshow where people could bring their pets to a red carpet. Another project involved a tattoo table where people could come and draw out their tattoos on a large sheet of paper and tell stories about why they got them and what they mean. There was a real sense of play in these projects. Of mischievousness even. (It's how I've been approaching people on this trip. Assuming that they won't mind me being, well, a bit cheeky. It's how I always approach people. I think people understand it; mischief. It's a game; it's play and I think that people, deep down, understand play, however much it's been kicked out of them).

Wikki told us that Housing Associations are now paying less for cultural activities; there's a developing belief that this is not their job. But that the people who live in these neighbourhoods where there is a tradition of activity are beginning to understand this and are looking for how they can raise money for themselves.

Tijs Rooijackers comes to talk to us and shows us some images of a beautiful project he has been doing with a rapper called Fresku. Fresku, who is to rap in Holland what Pietr Hein Eek is to design (this still isn't the later bit), writes on strips of wood which Tijs then bends and shapes into fantastic structures. (Have a look at a really great film about this on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_kspKGmLMk) After doing the first of these he developed the project further in Woensel, where a designers collective called Tante Netty live, making interventions in the area. They have made and given out bird houses. They have painted the houses that have been left empty before they are demolished as redevelopment happens. When they think of something, Tijs says, they just do it.

They are trusted now. They are embedded.

Tijs work in Woensel has been to continue with the idea of people writing on slats of wood, only these are written on by people who live there, and rather than being in an art gallery they are hanging in the trees. There are ten different areas in Woensel with over 700 slats suspended up above the heads of those that live there. He doesn't call himself a community

artist. It's about power. He knows that he is making the work, the decisions; and that those who contribute are adding to something that he is making.

And then a new word appears; almost out of the blue. Co-design. This is the term that the community artists and designers and social policy people appear to use. And there is a lot of it, this co-design. We walk past an empty tract of land that is designated as Space S where housing is to be built. There are co-design sessions where architects come to talk to potential residents about what they want to see in the new dwellings that will be put there. Four hundred 'units'; around one hundred and fifty for students and some for the elderly. They have a Facebook page with around six hundred people conversing on it. People will be chosen to live in the new buildings on their level of participation. The more comments and likes you can get in the more chance you can live on this site where my Dad's razor was probably made.



We go to a café to see Ingrid van der Wecht. She is an arch evangelist for co-design and is the Project Manager for Capital D. I'm not quite sure what she does. One of the projects she is involved in is called Proud, which stands for People Researchers Organisations Using Design. The door of their offices say Design / Cooperation / Brainport. It's back to this idea about Eindhoven being very smart. Because of the innovation of the Philips factory. Where the people of Eindhoven used to work.

There's something nagging at me. And it's connected to Piet Hein Eek; the designer who is based here; who struck a great deal with the local authority. His work is made here; his show rooms are here; you can buy his stuff. It uses reclaimed materials. It is great. And hugely expensive. He rents out space to artists and designers. The café we go to for lunch is run by something called The Robin Hood project, a Jamie Oliver type thing where the unemployed work in restaurants that most of their friends probably can't afford to come to. The restaurant we are shown, as we continue to walk around this huge ex industrial site, now a home for new tenants and those mainly employed in design, is one of those cavernous spaces with untreated walls. There are huge slabs of machinery and old radiograms. It is shabby chic at its shabbiest and at its chicest. It is, I suggest to Wikki, a temple of the middle class aesthetic; one that I recognise from the UK. 'Where are the greasy spoons?' I ask; 'are they not allowed on this site?' They are at the edges, she tells me, knowing exactly what I mean. The people who once worked here are not the kind of people that are being enticed onto this new site. (Wikki told us that many of the people that come to the Drent Dorps HQ don't like the building. Even if it was built by some fancy well known designer. Like Piet Hein Eek).

And so, I ask Ingrid, from Capital D, is this design that you talk about basically all interior design; that cult that allows people to sink further and further into their own houses, the exact opposite of what perhaps they are trying to do here? But I am not understanding the situation at all. There is interior design, there is product design, there is housing design, there is scientific design. The first Television broadcast in the world was made on this site and now this is providing a vision for the future.

(I've just had a look and Brainport, which is actually yet another region in Eindhoven is 'according to the Intelligent Community Forum (ICF) the world's smartest region in 2011, and a top technology breeding ground for innovation and home to world-class businesses,

knowledge institutes and research institutions. Together they design and manufacture the technology of the future to ensure a safe, green and caring society and sustainable economic development of the Netherlands. The five focal sectors of Brainport Eindhoven region are High Tech Systems & Materials, Food, Automotive, Lifetec and Design'. So that's told me).

There is lots that is great about it; but there's something that I'm not quite comfortable with. Maybe it's something to do with 'Common People', the song that we bounced along to on the way here. Maybe it's because I have a sneaking fear that however much co-designing is done, there will be issues of taste, that are really badges of class, that may be a bridge too far for those who have the future in their sights. That those who live on the edges, where the Angels have been doing their work, will never truly be let in to the place where they once spent their working lives and made it the area of innovation that it became. But then again maybe I don't really understand what is happening here at all.

You'll never live like common people / You'll never do what common people do / You'll never fail like common people / You'll never watch your life slide out of view, and dance and drink and screw / Because there's nothing else to do.