

**Next Level:**  
**Melanie**  
**Bonajo**

16.9 – 7.12.16

**Night Soil**

# Night Soil

As part of the *Next Level* series, Foam presents the first major solo museum exhibition by Melanie Bonajo. For the first time, the complete video trilogy *Night Soil*, which she has been working on since 2014, will be shown.

*Night Soil #1/ Fake Paradise* is an exploration of the healing effect of the hallucinatory drug Ayahuasca, that has been used for thousands of years in the Amazon region, on the mind and spirit of people today. *Fake Paradise* is also about the relationship between humans and nature. *Night Soil #2/ Economy of Love* portrays a group of female sex workers in Brooklyn who try to shake up our ideas about intimacy. In doing so, they attempt to regain control over their own sexuality in a world dominated by the male gaze. *Night Soil #3/ Nocturnal Gardening*, the third and final instalment, is about radical ways of supplying food, about native land rights and about the racism hidden in our food system.

The *Night Soil* trilogy is presented as a total installation, made up of rooms with differing atmospheres that completely submerge the visitor in the work. These psychedelic and hallucinatory spaces have been created by designers Clemence Seilles and Theo Demans.

Melanie Bonajo, who lives in Amsterdam and New York, occupies a unique position in contemporary art and has developed into a wayward artist who works across various disciplines including photography, video, installations, publications, performance and music. Since the start of her career, Bonajo has never allowed herself to become pigeonholed. She refuses to let her practice be confined to one medium alone. Her anarchic streak as well as her energetic ability to escape from social conventions are particularly striking. Foam curator Kim Knoppers and Melanie Bonajo spoke to each other during the development of the trilogy in person and via e-mail.



Still from *Night Soil/ Economy of Love*, 2015



Still from *Night Soil/ Economy of Love*, 2015

**Kim Knoppers:** The title *Night Soil* sounds both beautiful and intriguing. Why did you choose it for your trilogy?

**Melanie Bonajo:** *Night Soil* refers to what takes place in the nightly earth, to what is hidden from our everyday consciousness, and which is operating in the shadowlands of our belief systems. On another level, *Night Soil* is a euphemism for human excrement. Humans are animals whose waste is distributed across the planet. From that waste, new life can grow. We are obsessed with 'the new'. In our contemporary culture nothing gets old anymore, only newer: to the point where decay and darkness as a result of everything we've done in the past has been eliminated from our moral system. The title *Night Soil* can be considered a symbol for this broken cycle, in which past deaths no longer serve the lives of the future. I thought it would be a humbling metaphor.

**KK:** In your trilogy you explore, in a semi-documentary style, how people today are searching for a meaningful life in a world dominated by technological progress and the temptations of consumer culture. You are a child of the era of Facebook, Instagram and Apple in which we find ourselves. At the same time you are very interested in beliefs, mythology, spirituality and animism. These

opposites seems to collide in your work. Could you elaborate on this?

**MB:** We find ourselves ignored in a complex, capitalistic world in which we are taught to believe we never have enough. This new era of technology, money, cities, a common language, modern agriculture, sewer systems and water supplies is still young compared to the millions of years in which humans lived in communities of hunter-gatherers, guided by a sacred respect for their environment. The tradition of the West is to deny access to spiritual traditions and innate connections to the natural world. Yet, what remains constant, are the cycles of birth, coming of age, family, community, work, play, a sense of purpose and belonging and death. There are simply more 'toys' around now. Therefore, I believe that the archaic consciousness can still be rediscovered. How to be human in a deep, nomadic sense is something that I believe is still rooted in our DNA. It has simply been suppressed.

This demonstrates how Western bias privileges rational, logical thinking over imaginative thinking. Illogical thinking can still be analytical, but in a different, sensory way. There is a long history of Western culture being opposed to emotions and bodily senses, things that are reserved for the feminine, the





Still from Night Soil / Fake Paradise, 2015

wilderness, the animal, the primitive, the instinctive. We are finally beginning to see this because our world is in crisis. How we're transforming our planet into an eternal wasteland calls for greater awareness. This trilogy shows how we can begin to escape from this crisis. There are revivalist scenes of non-Western ways of thinking that have continued underground, using old folkloric traditions, and which are gaining more and more attention. It seems our culture is almost 'tone deaf' to the non-human world. I believe Nature is a place that has agency and personality of its own. The whole series is inspired by communication with plant spirits and basically I am executing what the plants tell me to do.

**KK:** I am curious to know a little more about the relationship between the trilogy's chapters. What is it that connects them?

**MB:** This trilogy is largely about women who have considered the possibilities of disobedience by way of, for example, anti-capitalist medication, or just by creating different systems. It's about women who take control of their own desires through self-determination and resistance to imposed states. I wanted to focus on 'the underbelly of global culture',

the unknown beings that are forced to hide because they are misunderstood but cannot live unless they continue to work. They see their roles in the world as vocations and they sacrifice everything for it.

**KK:** Your films are injected with light-hearted, absurdist scenes in which hand-made props and clothes are used in a very theatrical way. This gives the film something dazzling and humorous whilst also allowing for a very strong, serious message to be made. Could you elaborate a bit on the use of humour as a strategy?

**MB:** The films reflect upon the dark absurdity of human nature. I use humour as a strategy for talking about serious topics that might otherwise be polarizing to my audience. The truth is not always what is being stripped bare in front of the camera. The costumes and theatrical staging serve as filters. The transformation process is like a rite of passage to the other world, the real world. By staging scenes, the reality and truth that is felt inside comes out or is transformed. Often, make-up and costumes are the initiation or gateway, just as in many cultural traditions and ceremonies. It is a very delicate, intuitive play in which a form of controlled chaos is

applied to open up space for freedom. My images show a reality and a denial of structures of oppression that manipulate everything into a product. I work with people and things that 'have no value' or 'status' and give them an alternative value. I aim to address subjects without imposing new dogmas. The films serve as an invitation to play with alternative approaches and concepts. It opens up a choice. Hopefully the audience leaves a little more in love with the world.

**KK:** You have just finished the last part of the trilogy, *Night Soil #3/ Nocturnal Gardening*. Within this chapter, stories about radical agriculture are told by four protagonists with very different backgrounds: Lyla June Johnson, is one of the women. She is a Navajo land rights and nonviolent communication activist. She's also a musician. Mandana is a Paleolithic revivalist, anarchist and hunter-gatherer from Iran, currently living entirely off the land. She works as an educator and herbalist teaching people about plants on both a spiritual and scientific level. Leah Penniman is a food justice organizer and youth educator at Soul Fire Farm. This is a family farm working to dismantle the structures of oppression within our food system and end

racial injustice through farming and increasing sustainable growing with people marginalized by food apartheid. And last but not least: Dafne Westerhof is a farmer from Friesland who educates people on the behaviour and wellbeing of farm animals by giving pig massage workshops. She works with pigs from the farming industry that have been offered eternal life in pig heaven. They are all fiercely strong and opinionated women who are somewhat at odds with the image of women being facilitated by the media. What were you looking for in your main characters?

**MB:** *Nocturnal Gardening* started with my curiosity in women who live by alternative norms and have established communities by themselves. The women are emphasizing sensitivity, connection and communication with other communities, plants, animals and elements. They are women who attune their energies to the ecosystem around them with enhanced sensibilities. They are friends of the earth and dependent members of the community of Nature. They're exploring new ways of togetherness and doing this in a pragmatic, personal way. They are independent, but share their messages as educators and activists in the most humble way. Each is



Still from Night Soil / Fake Paradise, 2015



embracing social movements and self-organizing principles, exploring spiritual anarchy and the solitary wild in their own way. They apply measures that interrupt our current rules and speak out for an anti-capitalist system of care. They each also apply alternative systems of economy such as bartering and sliding scales, amongst others.

The food we eat is a very practical place to reflect on justice and injustice, because it is something that links and concerns us all: inside us, in our mouths, in our hearts, in our toes, in our thoughts and our behaviour. If you really think about the origin of your food before it is on your plate - where it comes from, who prepared it - a whole system of co-dependency and interconnectedness is presented to you. This film establishes an imagery which enhances our moral landscape in such a way that ecological, interdependent values, care for ourselves, our neighbours and our earth influences our decision making.

**KK: Your body of work in general is about people who are gutsy and different from the masses. It seems that with your art you**

**create a platform for voices that are often ignored. Why is this so important to you?**

**MB:** I am always looking to promote world-views that create space for different voices and forms of diversity. It does, of course, take extra effort to find these examples (like an African American-run farm that fights for land use justice and trauma reconciliation for food apartheid), than it does to find a cute little hip organic farm. I wish this strict division wasn't necessary. My main characters may not be the conventional totems of beauty or success, but there are so many beautiful representations of truth. I don't believe in a hierarchical system in which there is one truth above any other truth, and the same goes for beauty. I think the work speaks for people who are drawn to a shamanic vision on the world. A vision in which everything is sacred and that the earth and the multidimensional cosmos are present, meaning that humans should only take a small humble part. These people are often horrified by contemporary society and the global destruction it has unleashed, so they're searching for these forgotten traditions as well.



Still from Night Soil/Nocturnal Gardening, 2016

Power is all about responsibility. The people at the top of structures, privilege and power have the responsibility to change the world, not the minorities and oppressed. This is why I include these women in my work. For me, it is about highlighting cultures like Lyla's (Navajo culture) that were built upon principles that we believe in as children, yet slowly reject in order for us to become part of society: like an empathetic relationship with your environment in which you see friendships between species as being just as valid as relationships with humans. Or perhaps concepts such as having only one winner instead of a participatory system, or being taught to compete with others instead of teaching humility and service for others. The cultures who uphold the winner of the game as the most generous interest me, as well as the way, like Lyla explains, everything is sacred and alive. This has disappeared from the theatre of western culture.

#### Next Level

From autumn 2015, Foam is organising the Next Level exhibition series with support from Ammodo. This series aims to introduce a broad public to the innovative art of relatively young image-makers who take a revolutionary approach to the medium of photography.

Melanie Bonajo's work has been presented in an array of international group exhibitions, including at EYE Film Museum, de Appel Arts Centre, Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), Centre for Contemporary Art (Warsaw) and PPOW Gallery (New York). Her films have been shown at Kunsthalle Basel and at a number of festivals including the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) and the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA). She performs internationally with her band Zazazozo (with Joseph Marzolla), in a variety of combinations. Bonajo has made nine publications, of which *Matrix Botanica*, numero 1 - *Non-Human Persons*, is the most recent.

The exhibition design is realised by Clemence Seilles and Theo Demans. Melanie Bonajo is represented by AKINCI, Amsterdam.

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