

JOKE ROBAARD

SMALL THINGS THAT  
CAN BE LINED UP

# INTRODUCTION

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Joke Robaard is one of four artists commissioned by *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution* to produce a new work as part of Edition VI – Event and Duration (2015–2016). Robaard's video *Small Things That Can Be Lined Up* (2016) is the culmination of a series of workshops undertaken by the artist with a group of high school students from Cygnus Gymnasium in Amsterdam who made use of her image archive—a vast collection of photographs from fashion magazines and other media sources concentrated on image, text, and textile, which she has been compiling since the late 1970s.

When *If I Can't Dance* invited Robaard to undertake a commission, our question was, would she be interested in thinking of her archive and her photographic work—in which she stages networks of people (be they friends, colleagues, or neighbours) in sorts of tableaux without distinct narratives—in terms of “performance”? Our question was inspired by Robaard's continuous reassembly and rereading of her archive, a constant generative wellspring of the historical, political, and social information embedded in images. In addition, we were fascinated by how the body appears in her practice: the poses of fashion models and her own staged photographs of people, lending meaning to how clothing is worn in each context.

Robaard's new work began to take form at the introductory event for the edition, held at Cygnus Gymnasium high school in January 2016. The artist responded to the site by commencing an ongoing relationship with some of the students there who were keen to participate. She hosted a series of workshops in which she invited them to select and respond to images from her archive, and recite extracts from Plato's *The Statesman* and Vilém Flusser's *Our Images* inferring the precarious relation between text and image, and the metaphor of weaving. The first iteration of the work took place during our introductory event as the live presentation *Replacing Magical Images* (2016), and saw the teenagers read and elaborate on the texts while activating parts of the archive, effectively testing the material in front of an audience.

Robaard continued to engage with the group, inviting them to her studio to think further through the archive, to learn the texts by heart through repetition, to review the first performance and the gesture and movement it generated, and then to finally perform again for the camera across a day-long shoot in May 2016. Robaard gave them basic rules and guidelines to follow: move through the archive (which was laid out on the floor of a film studio's cyclorama like a spilled deck of cards), and when it was their turn, kneel down, pick an image and hold it up while from memory reciting the text they had been assigned. These directions were also complemented by unscripted feedback from the students, who were invited to create assemblages of images by laying out those selected side by side in a row. With this configuration, they would then offer their individual interpretations of paired images as a group.

In terms of “directing,” Robaard's approach can be likened to that of filmmaker Robert Bresson, most notably his idea of the “model” to describe the non-actors in his casts. In *Small Things That Can Be Lined Up*, for

instance, Robaard's performers are not actors and appear as themselves—they wear their own clothes and perform their simple actions without being directed to express or project emotion or character. Across the process Robaard purposefully avoided predetermining how the film would finally emerge, being a steady process of discovery and chance revealed by her work at each moment with the teenagers and resolved in the final editing. As Bresson wrote in his book *Notes on Cinematography* (1975): “You will guide your models according to your rules, with them letting you act in them, and you letting them act in you.”<sup>1</sup> And, “Model. Questioned (by the gestures you make him make, the words you make him say). Respond (even when it's only a refusal to respond) to something, which often you do not perceive but your camera records. Submitted later to study by you.”<sup>2</sup>

Having observed Robaard's directorial methodology, we have been struck by her reciprocity with those she works with, and how the placement of the teenagers' bodies alongside those of models pulled from archival images offers new readings of both. *Small Things That Can Be Lined Up* unpacks representation, bringing a sense of credibility or truthfulness, criticality, and depth to the images produced within the fashion industry—and likewise the figure of the teenager—all the while allowing us to think through the social body.

We are very pleased to have worked with Robaard on this new commission, and are excited by the temporal play and potential for assemblage of image and text that the video medium has allowed her, offering an eloquent response to our original question. For this publication we have invited art writer and educator Amelia Groom to write an essay in which she introduces Robaard's archive alongside this new film, through a considered reflection on the archive's relation to time and the body. This essay is followed by an excerpt from the *Small Things That Can Be Lined Up* script with fragments from Plato and Flusser as appropriated by Robaard and which were recited by the teenagers.

<sup>1</sup> Bresson, Robert, *Notes on Cinematography*, Griffin, Jonathan (trans.), Urizen Books, New York, 1975, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.





# 1. PLATO / THE STATESMAN

## 1. SARAH:

No higher truth can be made clear without an example; every man seems to know all things in a dream, and to know nothing when he is awake. And the nature of example can only be illustrated by an example.

## 2. JONA:

Children are taught to read by being made to compare cases in which they do not know a certain letter with cases in which they know it, until they learn to recognise it in all its combinations. Example comes into use when we identify something unknown with that which is known, and form a common notion of both of them.

## 3. MILO:

Like the child who is learning his letters, the soul recognises some of the first elements of things; and then again is at fault and unable to recognise them when they are translated into the difficult language of facts.

## 4. JACQUY:

Let us, then, take an example, which will illustrate the nature of example, and will also assist us in characterising the political science, and in separating the true king from his rivals.

## 5. EVA:

I will select the example of weaving, or, more precisely, weaving of wool.

## 6. LUCA:

In the first place, all possessions are either productive or preventive; of the preventive sort are spells and antidotes, divine and human, and also defences, and defences are either arms or screens, and screens are veils and also shields against heat and cold, and shields against heat and cold are shelters and coverings, and coverings are blankets or garments, and garments are in one piece or have many parts; and of these latter, some are stitched and others are fastened, and of these again some are made of fibres of plants and some of hair, and of these some are cemented with water and earth, and some are fastened with their own material,

## 7. MARIJN:

The latter are called clothes, and are made by the art of clothing, from which the art of weaving differs only in name, as the political differs from the royal science.

## 8. JACQUY:

I will make one more observation by the way. When a pupil at a school is asked the letters which make up a particular word, is he not asked with a view to his knowing the same letters in all words?

### 9. JONA :

And our enquiry about the Statesman in like manner is intended not only to improve our knowledge of politics, but our reasoning powers generally. Still less would any one analyse the nature of weaving for its own sake.

### 10. NOAH :

There is no difficulty in exhibiting sensible images, but the greatest and noblest truths have no outward form adapted to the eye of sense, and are only revealed in thought.

## 2. FLUSSER / OUR IMAGES

### A1. MARIJN :

Linear writing (for example the Latin alphabet or the Arabic ciphers) emerged as a revolution against images. It is possible to observe this revolution in specific Mesopotamian ceramic tiles.

### A2. LUCA :

They show the image of a scene, for example of a victorious king. The image is composed of “pictograms” that signify the king and his enemies kneeling.

### A3. MILO :

Next to the image the same pictograms have been imprinted onto the clay once more, but this time they form lines. These lines are texts that signify the image next to it.

### A4. JACQUY :

The pictograms in the text no longer mean “king,” but mean “king in the image.” The text dissolves the two-dimensionality of the image into a uni-dimensionality and thus modifies the meaning of the message. It starts to explain the image.

### A5. EVA

The text describes the image as it aligns the symbols contained in the image. It orders the symbols as if they were pebbles (calculi), and orders them in series just like a necklace (abacus).

### A6. NOAH :

Texts are calculations, enumerations of the image’s message. They are accounts and tales.

### A7. SARAH :

In Portuguese Flusser creates a play with the words “contas” and “contos.” Contas can be translated as both beads and accounts and contos as tales or loose change, small coins. Both allude to small things that can be lined up and strung together but that also point to a climate of linear narrative.