Artist statement | Marleine van der Werf

The other as mirror

What is happening in my head at the precise moment when I am writing these words and what is happening in your head when you are reading them? I’m not speaking about the mechanics of communication, but the subjective sensation of you being you and me being me. Our evolution is based on learning from experience and we can only attempt to understand a different perspective by interpreting it within our own subjective frame of reference. I became very aware we do not share the same reality when I was 10 years old and witnessed the psychoses of my father for three days. He saw snipers that attacked us that I couldn’t see and that frightened me. How can people truly understand something they’ve never experienced themselves? Why would we limit ourselves only to our own experiences?

In my work I explore how to experience the reality of someone else. In my films and multi-sensory installations I research the conditions we need to immerse inside the ‘Other’ perception. This attracted me to VR and combined this with multi-sensory input like smell and touch. Through cinema, virtual reality and multi-sensory technology I now create haptic experiences to challenge the understanding of the other and the self. Only by experiencing another reality as our own we can truly understand each other. It worries me that nowadays people are withdrawing more and more into groups of like-minded people in which subjective perception becomes reality. I’m convinced that artistic research on immersion can contribute to (re) create a meaningful connection to each other.

Through my projects I invite the spectator inside another reality to stimulate curiosity and imagination and to create the opportunity to reflect on them self through someone else’s experience. More that 300.000 people experienced my multi sensory installation ‘Be Boy Be Girl’. In this installation you can choose to be a person of the opposite sex sunbathing on the beach. At the first venue a participant told me he felt very vulnerable ‘being’ a woman in VR. Especially when a surfer approached him in the experience from the sea. He was scared the surfer would come to him for sex or even rape the woman that he was. At first I thought this was just a one-time encounter, but at every venue a man came to me with similar experiences. This showed me that people are not only able to connect to the virtual world and another body in a short amount of time, but also project their own fears on that new situation. I believe that learning from each other’s experiences functions as a mirror for our self, creates mutual understanding and is key to survive peacefully as a society.