

Reflections on EGON

EGON – translating Schiele's work into a transparent movement language

ESRS 2013 – This reflections are based upon the contributions of the authors to the discussion after the screening of their dance-film “EGON” on 29 June 2013 at the 2nd *International EGON SCHIELE RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM* Neulengbach 28–29 June 2013.



Michiel van Jaarsveld (Director)

General Reflection

The dance project ‘Egon’ started with Thom Stuart and the dream he had been wandering around with for over two decades after seeing a Schiele exhibition in Vienna: to translate these paintings into dance. But to be able to make use of powerful cinematic means such as framing and isolation of physical elements in space, it had to be done in film, rather than in the theatre. To me, that sounded like the most logical point of attack. Just going through a photo book with Schiele’s paintings creates moving images with a physicality that resembles modern dance.

But making it cinema also means telling a story and placing it inside some form of reality. The twisted, tormented bodies Schiele has put on canvas seem to be coming out of a feverish dream, or to be suffering from a fever themselves. Sickness and decay mix up with eroticism in a very direct way, creating highly memorable images.

To put all these elements together in our film, Schiele had to be the main character, his life, love and tragic death containing all the elements of his works. But we never tried to be biographical. We simply used elements of his life to create the feverish state of mind that is so strongly evoked by his paintings. This inspired us to use black and white and a more historical way of lensing to establish a

certain ‘reality’, whereas the dance sequences were shot in color, depicting Schiele’s imagination. But this ‘reality’ was a cinematic reality for us, allowing a more surrealistic approach into the black and white sequences. These images blend with his imagination, making for some of my favorite sequences in the film.

As a director, it was my first time working with dancers and a choreographer, which gave this project a special and new edge for me. But everything worked as organically, as I hope every collaboration to be. In the end, it was all about the film. Dance was never supposed to become the ruling art form of this project. It simply was the most direct way of translating the emotion of Schiele’s work.



Thom Stuart (Choreographer)
23 years: From Idea to Realization

The idea

The realization of 'Egon' in 2013 originated during my first visit to Vienna, in 1985, when I was introduced to Schiele's work and was immediately impressed by his expressiveness. On a visit a year later, I went all the way from Vienna to the border of Hungary, just to see an exhibition of his drawings, including the one of Gustav Klimt on his deathbed, which I have never seen anywhere since. Even though I didn't get the chance to go to Vienna for about 20 years after that, I periodically continued to study Schiele's work.

In 2009, I spent six weeks in Vienna while working at Theater an der Wien and was curious to see if Schiele's work would still make such an impression on me. And it did! Seeing his paintings, and especially his tormented - so physically expressive and not very "aesthetic" - but at the same time very erotic - self-portraits live again nearly made me cry. While watching his work over and over again at the Leopold Museum, I suddenly knew I had to make a short dance film inspired by Schiele. I knew it could not be a story-ballet, or a dance-solo, but a short movie, which would enable me to work in a more fragmented fashion. I immediately started searching for music and eventually came across Zemlinsky, which we used for the film.

When Dutch Mountain Movies inquired if I wanted to apply for a grant to make a short dance-film, I immediately agreed under the condition that it had to be a film about Schiele. The producer introduced me to director Michiel van Jaarsveld, who, as it turned out, also loved Schiele's work and believed that not spoken word, but dance would be the best language to express Schiele's work.

Realization

I originally envisioned to only use one dancer as Egon, and to base the whole film on his nude self-portraits. However, Mr. van Jaarsveld believed a storyline would realize the potential of dance film better than mere ten minutes of solo-dance. While we worked on the script together, we also knew that we could not define all aspects yet, and that we had to allow some room for experimentation during the creation period.

I made several short choreographies in the dance studio: a solo for Egon on his bed, the first meeting of Egon & Edith, a duet with the "Death", inspired by his paintings, and a love-duet with Edith, inspired by "Liebespaar 2".

In the film studio we alternated, in terms of directing. Mr. van Jaarsveld directed the acting scenes, based on my choreographies, while I guided the models improvising and posing, for instance. The filming itself, during which we spent 12 hours a day on the set, went very smoothly and we filmed so much that I was convinced the real tension between the film-director and the choreographer was yet to take place in the editing-room. I imagined having to fight for the dance scenes versus the acting scenes. But this was not the case: we always had been - and remained- united behind the same mission: to translate the essence of Schiele's work through movement, on screen. In meanwhile I realized that Schiele is still inspiring me to create more work around him. Hopefully a longer film or maybe eventually an evening-length story ballet will come to life in the years ahead.



Photo © Studio Oostrum

Youri Jongenelen (Egon Schiele)

Personal Reflection

I think it is safe to say that everyone tremendously enjoyed working on this dance film. The cooperation between producers, technicians, director, choreographer and dancers has led to the fine piece of art it has become now. Of course it could never be compared to the masterpieces of Egon Schiele himself. But the dance film was not to compete with Schiele's work in the first place. Rather, Schiele's work served as a great source of inspiration that made it easy to pick the visual images needed in order to translate some aspects of his life and work into the language of dance and film.

Translating Schiele's work through movement on screen took some time. For instance, I particularly remember how we tried to copy the body-painted male as in Schiele's painting "Self-portrait from the back". The colours were very typical for his paintings and we wanted to see whether we could use this in our film as well. When we finished the camera test, we decided not to use this kind of images, as the effect was too exaggerated. One can see some paint emphasised body parts in the film now. But to achieve the effect we were looking for, we had to use the paint much more discreetly.

There were some other interesting aspects we realised about Schiele's life while recreating the scenes. From time to time Gloria and I ended up saying to each other: 'This must be how it felt at this time in their life'. Not only our research but especially the work in the dance studio and on the film set helped us understand why they acted the way they did. For example, just as death was a constant companion throughout Schiele's life, I got used to constantly being confronted with the theme while creating the film and did not find it strange anymore that death plays such a prominent role in Schiele's work.

'Egon' has influenced my personal life and my way of thinking about the time Schiele lived in. Although I had studied many books as well as pictures of his work on the Internet, it was only after the shooting of the film that I visited Vienna, Tulln and Budapest to see his original works. I will never forget the impression they made on me. The collaboration between multiple art forms (visual and performing) has inspired me beyond my expectations.

Gloria Benedikt (Edith Schiele)

Personal Reflection

Little did I know that I was about to embark upon one of the most interesting projects in my career when I started working with Thom Stuart in October 2012. It was in December that I learned that I was to become Edith in his upcoming dance film *Egon*. Dancers nowadays rarely get the opportunity to portray historic characters, let alone one who has never been portrayed by anyone else in the past. So in this regard, becoming Edith was particularly rewarding to me. I soon embarked on my research in order to find out who she was, where she came from, how she thought and felt, and how I could convey these aspects in the film. Eventually I found a quote that served me well as a guideline:

While Edith didn't want her husband using other models, she was convent educated and therefore embarrassed about posing herself. The few drawings he did make of her, capture such defiance, but also a touching innocence. By her own account the two spent much of the time in bed, "pressed against each other as closely as possible so as to forget the world around us".

The shooting itself was very interesting for us dancers. In a way it was easier than being on stage because we never felt nervous, knowing that we would be able to shoot everything over and over again, whereas on stage we only ever have one chance to get it all right. But at the same time, we also had to put a different emphasis on every take. If the shot was from a wide angle, it was all about shapes, if the camera was very close, we had to pay much more attention to our faces. Also, on stage the dancer has a certain distance from the audience, which gives him or her a certain feeling of being in control. In film, that barrier does not exist. The camera allows for the audience to be much closer and therefore the relationship between the dancer and the audience becomes much more intimate.

On Funding and distribution

The production of *Egon*, which had a budget of 90,000 Euros was 100% funded by the Dutch government. One of the bigger challenges of our time when it comes to publicly funded new creations is accessibility. In other words, entrusted with public funding in the current socio-economic climate, we have to ask ourselves how we can create new work that is of high artistic quality, contains some degree of innovation and therefore experimentation, yet is also accessible to

a large segment of society. *Egon* promises to be able to live up to this challenge because it not only translates the Expressionism of Schiele's work into movement, but also captures very tragic human experiences everybody can relate to today, no matter whether they have known and appreciated Schiele before, or not. The second challenge of our time is to take dance, which is still considered an elitist art form by many, out of the conventional theater setting and to bring it back to society where it belongs. The first step in this direction was to capture dance through film. Now we hope that *Egon* will not only be shown at dance film festivals around the world but especially in Museums and other Schiele related events and that people of diverse backgrounds will be able to appreciate Schiele through a new medium.

An anecdote

As an Austrian who left Vienna in 2001 and has never worked there since, *Egon* also meant reconnecting artistically to my home country. But unexpectedly, it also took me on a journey back in my own family history. My grandfather's brother was born in Vienna in 1912. I still met him as a child, and to me he was always



'the grand uncle from the monarchy' because I was so fascinated by the fact that he attended Kaiser Franz Joseph's funeral when he was four years old. I remember thinking about this every time I shook his hand. Now, I had a new connection point. My grand uncle was in Vienna at the time Schiele died. When my great aunt (his wife) died in 2009 I went through her belongings and found a white shawl. It was a bit old fashioned, but I thought I could use it well to keep warm backstage at the theater and I have used it ever since. I also brought it along on the first shooting day of *Egon*. In the very first scene I'm cooling Egon's face with a sponge. We never really rehearsed or planned for this scene in terms of costume etc. and Mr. van Jaarsveld suggested I just wrap a shawl around my shoulders, as one would only see my back and my head. When the costume designer became distressed because she had nothing fitting with her, I realized that I did. This is how my own personal

story comes full circle: Through my grand uncle I was able to trace back to the Vienna of 1910s and now, 100 years later, his wife's shawl has made it into *Egon*.

Of course now I really wish I would have been able to meet my great grand parents, and ask them about their time in Vienna around 1900. How much did they pay attention to all the different art forms that were emerging at the time, to the various "isms", how did they experience the Spanish flu and how did they get through the war? And did they ever know enough about Schiele to contemplate what could have become of him, had he not died so young? What paintings would he have created, and to what degree would he have influenced the arts world? While I will never have answers, I'm glad that being part of *Egon* prompted these questions and connected me back to Austria, both artistically and personally.

EGON

Producer: Dutch Mountain Movies
Script: Michiel van Jaarsveld and Thom Stuart
Direction: Michiel van Jaarsveld
Choreography: Thom Stuart
Cast: Youri Jongenelen (Egon)
Gloria Benedikt (Edith)
Richel Wieles (Death)

