

THE HOME CRITIC: A VIRTUAL WALK- THROUGH PERFORMANCE BY MRKOPALJ



[Sander Janssens](#)

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You reach the end of the street and turn around to find that three months have slipped by. There is snow on the rooftops, and the streets are emptier and bleaker than they were in October. Is this how people experience time in the Croatian village of Mrkopalj?

Not in minutes, days, weeks, or months, but as a constant in which everything stays the same, albeit slightly bleaker from one day to the next?

In April, visual theatre maker Lieke Benders, writer Saskia de Haas, musician and composer Jolle Roelofs, and performer Tajči Čekada planned to present a series of performances in Mrkopalj as part of the collaborative theatre project Centiphery, developed for Rijeka 2020, European Capital of Culture. For this project, Benders and her fellow creators went on two residencies in the tiny village of Mrkopalj in October 2019 and January 2020.

The performances were cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic so Benders and her team decided to film a virtual walk-through performance instead using a 360-degree camera. Yesterday, STIL.Mrkopalj premièred as planned, albeit in digital form.

As a viewer, you can join the makers on a virtual YouTube tour of the abandoned village. Similar to the streets in Google Earth, you are free to explore any direction you like. The first half of the tour was filmed in October, the second half (the way back) in January. A narrator tells us more about the people who live in the houses we pass, about the village wood factory, about the pubs and their popular quizzes, and about the proud potato farmer and the choir.

We are immersed in the rituals and routines of this seemingly empty village nestled between the mountains and trees. The deserted street is filled with the stories of the inhabitants; the warmth and interconnectedness create a

stark contrast with the cold, empty streets. Street scenes offer little more than a first impression, and impressions can be deceiving.

Lieke Benders has spent the past four years working on a series of theatrical performances and installations in which she explores the relationship between people and silence. She never could have imagined that the world would grind to a halt in 2020, the final year of her research project. Before this global crisis, her ambiguous, poetic work may have been interpreted as a longing for stillness – as a welcome contrast to a deafening, chaotic world.

However, given our current situation, and the time we now find ourselves with, the oeuvre Benders has worked on since 2017 will undoubtedly be ascribed new connotations and new layers of meaning. The need to interpret silence and to find something to hold on to when surrounded by stillness seems, to me, even greater than ever before. How do you do that? Do you surround yourself with stillness and surrender to it? This is something I find myself struggling with in these unusual times.

Image: Herman van Bostelen with a photo by Jolle Roelofs