

I screamed and I screamed and I screamed

Screamed Lecture, performed by Sarah Vanhee in front of the prison of Mechelen, 23/08/2013

“Dear prison-directors,” I said to the three prison directors in Mechelen, “can I organize a screaming concert in your jailhouse?” I wanted to design a score, together with the prisoners, a score they would scream, each from their own cells, in all three wings of the building. It would make the prison vibrate and the bells of the chapel pale. On set days, at set hours, a collective muezzin of punished men.

The prison directors no. 1 and no. 2 – to my great surprise – said yes. Thank you, prison-directors!

Only they didn’t allow the prisoners to scream individually from their cells.

Whoever can be put in a nine square metres cell together with whomever, they said: a psychotic person with a car-thief, a drug-addict with a murderer. Only pedophiles have an own corridor. The screaming would cause chaos in the cells, they said, uncontrollable by the guards.

I understood.

I came up with a new proposal: A choir of about 15 screaming men in “de wandeling”, the place where the prisoners walk.

And yes, prison director no. 2 said, a screaming choir in de wandeling, would be accepted. No further questions were asked.

Jakob, Berno and me then started our workshop series in July.

The first time we had five men. Let’s call them Jack, Jean, John, Jimmy and Jamil. They were fantastic.

(fragment 5 men screaming)

Jean said he’d liked it, but might not come back since he’d probably be released soon. Jack and Jimmy were mocking him. “He’s one of those guys who repeats every day that he’ll go free”, they said, “but it never happens.”

Yet when we entered jail for our **second session**, there he was, Jean, at the prison-entrance, raising his arms and smiling: a free man.

The third round then only three screamers were left, because Jamil had started the Ramadan and was sleeping in his cell.

The voices of Jack, John and Jimmy were flourishing, but I was thinking it might be hard to form a screaming choir with only three men.

I investigated why no new participants were joining the gang.

Some telling facts popped up:

One: Some prisoners were interested, but they were working during rehearsal time. For work in the kitchen or the workshop or whatever, they receive 60 cents per hour. I had told the prison directors I wanted to pay our guys for their screaming work as well, but they wouldn’t permit. “Screaming is not working,” they said. One shouldn’t be paid for having fun.

Second reason for low turnout: For some workshops, the participants receive bonus points. These workshops are considered “restorative practices.” Storytelling for instance counts as restorative practice. “Screaming is not restorative,” said the directors. So no bonus points for our screaming men.

Third reason for low turnout: One could not go to the workshop without registering, meaning: the prisoners had to ask the guards for a form and fill it out. Once filled out, they had to go the library and give it to the librarian. The librarian had to collect the papers and pass them on to the responsible for cultural activities. The responsible for cultural activities had to put the names of the men from the forms all together on a list. This list had to be given to yet another person, who could then, with that list, go get the prisoners, and bring them to the rehearsal space.

This complicated chain of actions, turned out to be too involving for the prison staff, of whom half was on vacation. It was July, it was Ramadan, it was super hot. Bringing the guys from their cell to the workshop was far too engaging a thing.

So no. No high hopes for the coming of more prisoners.

But we went anyway to the **fourth session** of our prison workshop.

Jakob, Berno and I made a test. Two of us stood outside the prison wall. On the other side – inside – there was “de wandeling.” Jakob went there and started the screaming try-out.

He had only began, when some guys started raising their voices. Especially this one guy in his cell, in sighting distance from from where we were standing, was very disturbed by Jakob’s screaming. He kept yelling: “Hey, faggot, shut the fuck up, I want to sleep.” A very strong voice he had.

Others were excited, wondering about what was happening; one of “our screamers” in his cell, trying to explain to the others, said that this was “scream-art.” But the guy close to us kept freaking out, and a guard had to come to calm him down.

When we met Jakob after, he felt very intimidated. And he had no voice left to scream.

That same day Jimmy was released from prison as well. I was very happy for him. Jimmy is very young still. But that left us only with Jack and John.

One detail I didn't mention yet is that Jack is a professional singer, with a very particular screaming palette. Singing is beautiful and restorative. Singing has a calming effect. Singing is like working. It's normalizing.

(Fragment screaming singer)

After five sessions, with only one screamer and one singer left in our choir, I had a talk with director no. 2, with the responsible for culture, the responsible for the Flemish Government, the responsible for the library, the responsible of the Psycho-social Service. There were more responsible persons around that table than we ever had screaming prisoners in our workshop.

I pointed out that problem to them.

The librarian turned out to be our guardian angel. Bless her!

She said they could have known from the start that a workshop with ten participants is an idle illusion in this prison. It never happens. And certainly not during "de wandeling," or the visiting hours, or the working hours – during summer, during Ramadan, with none of the responsible persons present.

The persons present stayed silent first. No comment.

Then they told us the concept of a screaming choir was "too difficult" for the prisoners. "Too challenging." "Negative peer pressure." "One has to be really tough to resist and stand firm." The project had fallen out of grace with most of the prison staff, after the incident with Jakob in de wandeling. And once, John had screamed at a guard when he entered the rehearsal space. The guard hadn't particularly appreciated that. There had been complaints of one of the neighbours.

I knew all that would come up. In a country where a woman gets a fine for spitting out a cherry pit in the street, where, in some cities, fortune-telling and dream-explanation is forbidden, and in other cities street musicians have to pay 150 Euros when they get caught playing out of tune. I understand screaming is a most controversial thing. In Berlin, they had to give the sound of playing children the same exceptional legal status as church bells, emergency sirens, snow ploughs and tractors, to prevent complaints.

A screaming choir, in this specific jail, was an impossible thing to achieve, regarding its precarious social body and the limbo these men are in. I understood.

I came up with a final plan: to avoid bureaucracy, ponderous logistics and selective unwillingness, I proposed the directors a series of simple, minimal scream-donation sessions.

No rehearsals, no explorations. A single 40-minute crash course. Windows closed, screaming out straight away, indoors. Singular screams of volunteer prisoners. Voices like fingerprints.

The directors said yes. Thank you prison directors!

(fragment: single scream)

There is nothing more personal than a voice. Screaming is something very intimate. To open your mouth and let off sounds from a hole in the middle of your face.

But you do it, you speak, or you scream, primarily, in order to be heard. And the idea of being heard, of possessing a voice nearly coincides with that of human and civil rights. Having a voice is much the same as having a vote.

A voice is never a voice in general though. It is always a voice of a particular kind.¹

In the end, we scream alone. Even if we all scream together, we scream alone. You scream alone.

With great power, you push air out of your lungs, through your throat.

Screaming is not organized. You scream alone and you scream even if no one is listening.

The librarian decided to help and communicated my invitation to individual scream-donations directly to the men. She skipped the forms, skipped the list, skipped the responsible who had to make the list. She just encouraged visitors in the library, to join the crash course screaming.

They came, 3 at the time. They were fantastic. One guy decided to scream "libere" as a donation for the installation. You can listen to him and the voices of about twenty different screaming prisoners in this installation.

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Feel free to scream with them.

¹ "I see a voice", Jonathan Ree