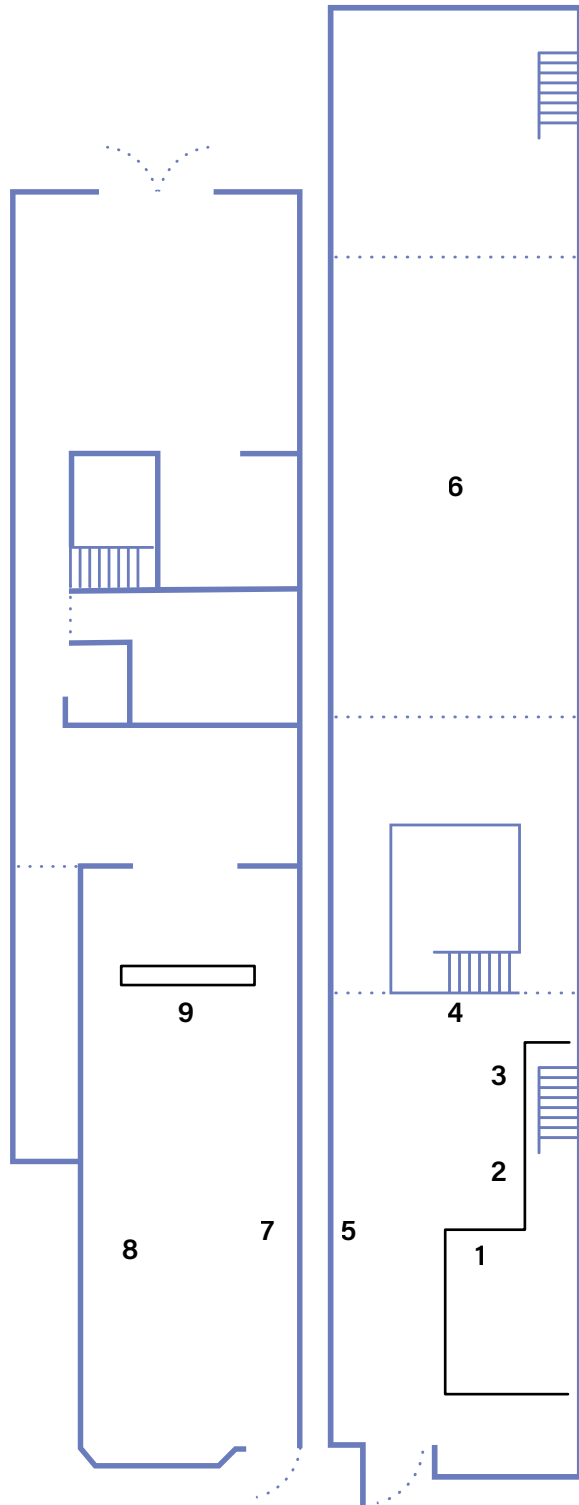


To provide you with more insight into the development of this exhibition, we're sharing a conversation between the artist and a correspondent. The correspondent was not familiar with the artist's work and, like you, has discovered through this dialogue the often invisible choices made during the creation of this project, as well as in the artist's general working process.

**Bob Demper**  
in conversation  
with  
**Semâ Bekirović**  
As part of the  
exhibition  
**IN TALL  
BUILDINGS**

1. **Tombstone**  
Automated tie racks, ties, deal toy, smoke machine, 2024
2. **Hard act to follow**  
Polyester resin, polyurethane rubber, 2021
3. **Dojima Rice Exchange**  
Wood, oil paint, acrylic paint, 2024
4. **Keystroke**  
Wood, polyester clay, plexiglass, 2024
5. **Roundaboutness**  
Curved LED-strip, polyurethane resin, 2024
6. **239 W 26th St**  
Mixed media, 2024
7. **1:1**  
High pile carpet, footsteps, 2024
8. **Folie à plusieurs**  
Oil paint, printer-ink, plexiglass and letter profile, 2020
9. **Fragments of 5000 Miles**  
4K video, 2024



# Bob Demper in conversation with Semâ Bekirović

## As part of the exhibition **IN TALL BUILDINGS**

For more information about this and other projects,  
check our website or scan the QR-code:



# 1646.nl

## Bob Demper

Bob Demper (b. 1991) is a multi-disciplinary artist living and working in The Hague (NL). By employing familiar cinematic motifs in his work, Demper's artistic practice creates expectations for the audience that can be subverted, fulfilled or deconstructed. His approach extends across various mediums, with ideas that appear in his longer films mutating into shorter videos, sculptures and installations, creating a cohesive body of work. His work has been shown at Museum Helmond, Nest Den Haag, Prospects/ Art Rotterdam and ENCU Shanghai (CN).

Bob Demper would like to thank the following people for helping and collaborating with him over the past few months:

Cast: Rick van Uum and Bob Demper  
Cinematography: in collaboration with Pedro Gossler  
Set building: Anna Spiliotopoulou, Maria Chiara Ziosi, Alexander Webber  
Robotics: Tim Demper

Thanks to: Maja Klaassens, Thessa Meijer, Koen Slaats, Henk and Patty Demper

## Semâ Bekirović

Semâ Bekirović studied at the Rietveld Academy and was a resident at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam, in 2005-2006. Her work has been exhibited in several venues, including at Rozenstraat – a rose is a rose is a rose (solo, 2023); The Hayward Gallery (solo, 2010); The Stedelijk Museum (2007, 2013, 2015); Dutch Culture Institute, Shanghai (2010); MoMA PS1 (2012); Kunstfort Vijfhuizen (2016); Marres (2017); Nest (2018); GEM (2019); Garage Rotterdam (2020); Klub Solitaer, Chemnitz (solo, 2020); Into Nature Biennale; Paltz Biennale and the Bruges Triennale (all in 2021). The upcoming presentation at the Fries Museum is Bekirović's first museum retrospective since her exhibition at Museum Jan Cunen in 2013.

Mar 14, 2024

From: Semâ Bekirović  
To: Bob Demper

Hello Bob,

Here we go...

How's it going? Are you busy? Nervous about your exhibition? Or is everything under control?

Greetings,

Semâ

Mar 20, 2024

Hi Semâ,

"Here we go!"

That sounds like something you'd say, just as the roller coaster cart is being hoisted over the highest point of the ramp... And that's how it kind of feels now – about 1.5 months before the opening of this exhibition.

I noticed that you are opening a retrospective exhibition at the Fries Museum soon, congratulations! I can imagine you're not exactly calm at the moment either? It's great that you're willing to make time for this conversation just before such a big exhibition. The last time we spoke, I was in a somewhat similar state as I am now: stressed out just before an exhibition. Something that really resonated at the time is that you noted that while my findings based on my research into the financial system were very serious and grotesque, my installations and videos often have a friendly and innocent character. I have thought about this a lot since then.

Although I don't think my work will take a 180-degree turn, in this exhibition I expect that the uneasy feeling that I've accumulated over the years will be more palpable for the viewer.

I do feel a bit of stress at the moment. That is not because of this exhibition, but more due to my working method. I think I always invite stress a little. Although I have a clear idea beforehand, the actual work always crystallises when I am working on it. My studio is currently filled with the skeletons of three film sets, all of which will move to 1646 in parts at the beginning of April: the lobby of a financial institution, an old-fashioned apartment corridor, and a meeting room. All these spaces are set pieces for the film I have been working on for some time (*5000 Miles*), as well as installations you can walk through. In many ways, this is a continuation of my installation *Black Rock, Soft Storm*. I believe I still owe you the documentation of that, so here it is: [link to video](#).

In terms of nerves, things are going well, but perhaps that will change when we actually start the build-up next month. I am especially looking forward to the construction period in the project space, as I might be able to enjoy the upcoming spring weather a bit more. In my windowless studio this is unnoticeable.

Greetings!

Bob

Mar 26, 2024

Hey Bob,

I completely relate to that analogy of the roller coaster cart! The only way out is through... and I rumble along happily...

That's perhaps what I'd like to talk to you about as well, about processes, whether they're financial systems or our creative processes, which often seem larger than ourselves. The tendency is to surrender to them like a roller coaster ride. But at the same time, you know you have to try to steer, even if it's just to maintain the illusion of autonomy. Thank you for the link to your film; I'm deeply impressed by your work, especially the scale and perfection with which it's executed. On one hand, you seem to have complete control over your film, the sets, the subject. On the other hand, the character in your film appears utterly trapped, in his environment, but most notably, through the mask, in his emotions. At the same time, I can imagine that you might also feel trapped in a certain way by your work, as you write about being in your windowless studio while spring unfolds. To what extent do you embody your character, or experience something similar?

With warmth,

Semâ

Apr 4, 2024

Hi Semâ!

Thank you for your mail and words of praise!

**My roller coaster is officially in descent. Working with a team of assistants makes it feel like the process is slipping a bit from my hands, but in a very nice and helpful way. The process - how ideas emerge, develop, and mutate - has become incredibly important in my practice over the past few years.**

**A little bit of background: after completing my film education, I stopped making films pretty soon as I found the process too rigid, and I wanted to conduct research in a more tactile way. After a few years of working on small sculptures, I thought: I want to make a film again, but without producers and a whole crew. Something that can organically emerge and can be fulfilled in a non-linear way. In 2018, I travelled for 3 months with a camera from Los Angeles to New York and I initially wanted to make some sort of documentary.**

**A week after arriving in America, I realised that this documentary wasn't for me, but I kept filming; to create some sort of personal visual archive. Just before I went on my journey, I purchased a cheap rubber mask of an old white man. Slowly, a character emerged from it, a bored (mythological) Trickster figure, wandering through forests and deserts. Since I hadn't brought an actor in my suitcase, I played the character myself. Upon my return, the main character Donny emerged. Initially from one image: a lost figure on a beige recliner in an old-fashioned apartment in New York. In the traditional approach to filmmaking,**

**I would then proceed to develop this character, invent a backstory, etc... Instead, I started building his apartment with its associated alley, aiming to learn more about the character in that way. Writing, filming, making music; it mostly happens in a random order, loose ends have to come together... In the screenplay, for instance, I write things like 'Donny is startled by the phone,' only to find out months later who is calling him. In this way, the film comes together in a very messy but, in my opinion, the most natural and, above all, adventurous way. Sometimes it does seem like I have complete control over what I'm creating, but I much prefer it when I don't exactly know what I'm doing. If anything has autonomy, it's the work itself.**

**The film has become a sort of magnet where particles of my research into financial power and personal experiences continue to adhere. In Donny, there are certainly elements of myself: he is constantly on edge and has something neurotic about him. In the film's story, Donny works at a major financial institution but quickly experiences burnout. Since my student days, I've been working for a company that provides webinars for Dutch companies and multinationals. In expensive hotels and halls of glass office buildings, I capture internal communications and shareholders' meetings. At first, it seemed as if they were speaking a different language that no one outside the financial world could understand. By now I understand what is being said, and I try to examine through the widest possible lens how financial systems originated, how they operate, and how they all have a stranglehold on us. The people at the top of large companies, manipulating financial markets, try to instil the confidence that they have it**

**all under control, which is, of course, an illusion. What they mean is that they have the risks under control and that if things go wrong, they don't have to bear the consequences themselves. The more I find out about this system, the more oppressive it feels to me. This oppressive feeling is Donny's experience, and in that sense, he may be more of a feeling than a complete character. I believe the masks help with this and also leave a significant degree of interpretability to the viewer.**

**This weekend, we have a filming day, so I'm going to prepare for that now.**

**See you soon!**

**Greetings,**

**Bob**

Apr 9, 2024

Hello Bob, great to hear that you're in the descent!

And thanks for the background information.

You studied at the Film Academy, to what extent has that influenced your working method and way of thinking? How does this compare, for example, with artists who have studied visual arts? And how do you see your work now, between these two worlds? Do you primarily create your films for an exhibition context, or for example also for film festivals? And what do you think the difference would be in how the work functions within these contexts? I also find it very interesting how you draw inspiration from the financial world, and that you have found a way to observe it from the inside. Do you ever talk about your own work with people you might meet through your web seminars? Have you ever shown them anything, and if so, how was it received? Or do you prefer to keep those worlds separate? I've also always tried to find side jobs that, in one way or another, offer me a glimpse into another world (making sandwiches on film sets, working in healthcare). At the moment, I only occasionally teach at art academies, which I also find incredibly educational. Where do you draw the line as an artist, how much is your side job a part of the work you create?

See you soon, and good luck with the final stretch! :)

Apr 16, 2024

Hello Semâ!

We're in the building! :)

From this weekend, everything is out of the studio and in 1646. It is a relief to see the three spaces of 1646 slowly coming to life. As I write this, I have a view from above (1646 has a sort of internal balcony) of the apartment corridor. It has truly become a bizarre space and, due to various practical considerations, has taken on its own unique form. Initially, there were all sorts of cinematic desires (the way you look down the hallway and how it creates certain perspectives), and then the film set had to adapt to the physical limitations of the exhibition space. The first sketch I ever made of the hallway was almost a straight hallway, now it has all sorts of angles and dents. Unintentionally, the hallway suddenly gained much more character. Filming last week went very well (see impression). We filmed, among other things, a scene where Donny – at this point in the narrative he is just on work leave – tries to find some relaxation in his home. In his apartment in the bustling city, that doesn't work out so well: hissing radiators, stomping noises from the neighbours, honking cars. But there is one sound he absolutely cannot stand: a scratching noise coming from an air duct. Outside on the facade of his apartment, a pigeon has settled itself on the exhaust of that air duct, where the pigeon walks with its little feet over the air duct. In my previous studio, I had exactly such a noisy pigeon; it really took a few weeks before I realised that the sound came from the air duct, which only exited the building 15 meters away. Such moments are often the starting point of scenes, which I obviously expand and exaggerate. My training as a film director

at the HKU (the Film Academy seemed at the time too ambitious for me as a 19-year-old) was a bit disappointing. You can't learn to make films in four years, and maybe my expectation was that after four years of studying, I could immediately do everything I wanted. Two friends were studying at the KABK in The Hague around the same time, and despite not studying there myself, I spent a lot of time there. I've always seen that as my second education. The field of a visual artist seemed much freer and offered much more opportunity for depth and exploration. In that regard, I've let go of the title filmmaker a bit. Currently, fragments of the film end up in installations, allowing them to also establish a relationship with physical space. This is not something I consciously chose, but something that slowly began to feel logical within the process. Ultimately, I do believe that *5000 Miles* deserves a dark cinema hall. There's something magical about the unspoken agreement between the audience and the film. You sit down, the lights go out, and despite knowing that everything is staged, you believe for a moment in what's being presented to you.

I completely understand what you mean about side jobs. On one hand, as an artist, you're naturally forced to work alongside your practice, but entering other worlds can greatly broaden your perspective. In addition to the corporate work I do, I also work as an art handler in museums. That does, of course, have some overlap with our work environment, but it also offers a refreshing and sometimes absurd look behind the scenes. Through that job, for example,

I ended up on a 90-meter-long superyacht and spent three weeks packing artefacts from ancient Egypt. I think I try to keep my corporate work and my "real work" (i.e., being an artist) separate. Of course, my colleagues know that I'm an artist, but I never flaunt it in the corporate world. There's often no time for it either; the company's top brass often arrives late, and the rest of the employees are running around trying to get everything in order on time. I do my job and I observe: the people, the use of language, the spaces, the atmosphere. In my studio, I work with all those impressions. Often, I hear interesting terminology, something I don't immediately understand, and then I briefly immerse myself in it. For example, during the making of this exhibition, I read two books: one about *offshoring* (tax evasion)<sup>1</sup> and one about governments and banks constantly printing artificial money<sup>2</sup>. I try to approach the current role of capitalism as broadly as possible and to examine it from as many perspectives as I can. I believe that understanding the origins of this system is just as important as trying to guess where it's heading and how it can be dismantled. While building the sets, I listened to a nearly 30-hour semester from Yale University about financial markets<sup>3</sup>. I think I am saturated in that area for a while...

It's already 1 in the night, so it's time to recharge for a new build-up day.

Warm regards,

Bob

<sup>1</sup> Treasure Islands: Tax Havens and the Men Who Stole the World – Nicholas Shaxson

<sup>2</sup> Keystroke Capitalism: How Banks Create Money for the Few – Aaron Sahr

<sup>3</sup> Financial Markets (2011) with Robert Shiller

April 20, 2024

Thank you for your lovely comprehensive email.

Yes, that's probably going to be interesting, figuring out how your film works in different contexts. In an art installation, the viewer usually decides when to enter and exit the installation. As a result, art tends to give a more democratic viewing experience than film. Watching a film in a cinema hall is more compelling. You almost have to surrender to it. However, in an art installation, there is often more freedom to interpret the work as one sees fit. Personally, I enjoy watching art films in a cinema setting because, in this case, you surrender yourself, yet the film itself allows freedom for interpretation. Hollywood films often make me feel somewhat claustrophobic, in the sense that I feel trapped in a coercive interpretation. I've noticed, when I made my film *Once an Alien*, that there are very few opportunities for small artistic films. It's challenging for visual artists to break into film festivals, and distributors often don't see potential in these types of films. Fortunately, I was able to showcase my film in an art context as well.

I just saw your stills, they look beautiful. I was wondering: do you think it's important for people to 'forget' that they're looking at a person wearing a mask, or is it more important for them to remain aware of that (to show 'look, this isn't real, it's a construction of a person')?

I relate to what you're saying about research (temporarily immersing yourself completely in something for a project). Over the years, you accumulate endless amounts of unrelated knowledge (in your case, perhaps about building sets, the acoustics of drainpipes, financial markets,

and Egyptian artefacts :-)). I find it to be a great wealth to be able to poke around in so many fields, and worlds. Whether it's for research on a project or from a side job, somehow that knowledge always finds its way into new projects. In this way, as artists, we still somewhat fulfil the old ideal of the 'Uomo Universale'. I also believe that this is where art has great political potential. This doesn't necessarily have to be embedded in the message of artworks, but rather in the relational aspects between artworks, the world, and the creators, and the questions this raises: what is the relationship between these objects, these people, and this infrastructure? What power structures can be derived from this, and can I make them visible, break them, etc.?

Anyway, sometimes we also need to stop asking questions and just finish something, like your exhibition, my exhibition, and this conversation. I really enjoyed exchanging thoughts with you, and I wish you success with the final touches. I will definitely come and see you!

Greetings,

Semâ

April 23, 2024

Semâ!

The time for questioning and pondering everything is indeed over. I always become much more practical and determined just before finishing an exhibition. You could almost call it a more effective way of working, but I completely agree with you that the meandering, the seemingly aimless, is exactly what brings the artist to places that are sometimes hard to reach. Very well said about the political potential, I strongly resonate with this. In many professions, you become specialised so quickly that it seems very challenging for me to draw connections between different disciplines, movements, and all the interesting (un)visible things happening around you. Sometimes, when I hyperfocus on financial matters for a little too long, I also notice that I start seeing everything through that lens. Then, it's really time to follow completely different tracks.

I can very well imagine that Hollywood films make you feel claustrophobic. Personally, I can sometimes enjoy them, especially old Hollywood films. I believe I've seen almost every film noir by now; those films often have something very simple, almost clumsy, that I find great. But I prefer sitting in a cinema and watching a very slow film; recently, for example, I watched *Jeanne Dielman* by Chantal Akerman. The film lasts 3.5 hours, but I completely forgot I was in a cinema. I would never have had that experience at home or in an art space; I would probably have done something else after half an hour. I often use the language of Hollywood films as a starting point; I hope that the audience will at least join me for a while. That's also what I find interesting about using masks: because all physiognomy is missing,

images that are recognisable suddenly have a completely different readability. Take, for example, a scene in which two people are talking. Precise methods have been developed to effectively capture this, such as eye level, viewing angles, etc. I, more or less, use all those rules, but the essence (the face with an 'expression') is missing. Yet I believe that as a viewer, you eventually forget about the mask after a while, just as you forget that you're actually watching a movie. Without consciously doing so, I'm constantly deconstructing *cinema*, seeing what I can leave out without everything collapsing.

The omission of elements in my work is an overarching theme. A few years ago, while reading the book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, I came across the term *absent referent*. Author Carol J. Adams uses this term to refer to a function where the 'use' of animal and female bodies is completely detached from the fact that a woman or animal is suffering. I find myself repeatedly returning to this widely applicable term. The masks refer to a character, but the person seems absent. Shareholder meetings in which humans - and nature - are absent. Companies hide themselves behind layers of lawyers and *shell companies*, so that no one is ever held accountable. A thin veneer, with a world of nuance and intrigue behind it. With that mindset, I think people can best enter the exhibition.

I really enjoyed writing these emails to you and I am very grateful for your thoroughness and clear questions. I hope to see you soon and, as soon as the storm has calmed down a bit, I will definitely visit your new exhibition!

Greetings,

Bob