

Running for the Bus (or in this case, the tram) A performance by David Sherry

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On Saturday May 15th David Sherry did the most simple thing any city dweller could do: he missed the tram. Standing there, with countless others I couldn't help but smile as I identified with the painful moment of a tram departing, as David, laden with shopping bags, went running after it. As I looked around me, I saw bikers slowing to watch, tourists pointing and speaking, and a small group of artists analyzing and nodding their heads in approval. Everyone momentarily caught up in their own narrative, with knowing looks of empathy for the poor man who missed the tram.

In its simplicity, David's performance is pure joy to witness. The tram doors closing, the bell ringing as it begins to move, the ensuing chase- ultimately ending in disappointment as the tram picks up speed and disappears around the bend, leaving David out of breath in the middle of the street. The whole action itself takes less than one minute from beginning to end, and countless passersby are given cause for reflection, a small token which they may not even recount to their friends when they arrive at their own destination. But as the day progresses, the repetition of this simple act takes on another significance, allowing dedicated viewers to experience something more.

David's performance was a part of the exhibition by de Appel Curatorial Programme, "I'm Not Here. An Exhibition Without Francis Alÿs". This whole exhibition, comprised of works which imply the presence of the protagonist without any literal references to him or his work, can be summarized in the 'missing'. Missing as a form of alternative presence, in both a temporal and spatial context. In this way David is indeed missing the tram. For one minute, all those present at the site are privileged to witness this action of missing and momentarily reflect on its relevance to their own lives. But for the viewers who are explicitly aware that they are watching a performance, there is another layer which makes this performance so gratifying to see.

The performance of missing the tram is also *missing* on the level of performance. The viewers coming from the exhibition space de Appel Boys' School gather outside, carefully watching David, who is at ease at the tram stop as to be expected, waiting for the tram. Over time, the crowd coming from the Boys' School is growing, as all the visitors patiently wait for the tram to come and for the inevitable moment of catharsis. Finally, a tram approaches and all the audience falls still, the ten minutes of waiting finally transforming into the one minute of performance. After a quick run, the moment is over and some of the crowd moves on their way in order to see the rest of the exhibition, or take their bikes and go on in their own lives. This entire cycle repeats itself every 8-10 minutes depending on the frequency of the tram, but the beauty of this cycle is the *missing* performance. The performance is the running and the disappointment; but the performance is also the waiting. The buildup of expectation, the growing audience surrounding the tram stop, the extra large group of heads all turned the same direction searching for the approaching tram; these are all parts of the performance, which members of the audience slowly grow aware of during the waiting. Only after witnessing several repetitions of this cycle does this larger aspect of the performance emerge.

Another manifestation of this emerges from the coincidence that the Exhibition grew to include the restaurant across the street from the Boy's School: de taart van m'n tante. Due to its proximity, this cake and pie café became closely related to “I'm Not Here. An Exhibition Without Francis Alÿs”, with some parts of the exhibition occurring on its first floor, and many of the visitors choosing to mingle with the tourists in this cafe for a piece of the famous pie. David's performance abruptly transforms the space into a captive audience as time and time again a tram goes speeding past the enormous front window with a man chasing after it with full grocery bags. The tourists and exhibition visitors alike were privy to a special point of view, watching the performance through the window, limiting the perspective to this one moment of the action. In this context, only after several repetitions does the captive group of onlookers begin to anticipate its action, and become acutely aware of their role as audience. The reactions are diverse, ranging from pleasantly amused, to a sense of incredulous bafflement. The beauty of David's performance is its ability to trigger all these reactions in the onlookers- those who came explicitly to witness it as well as those who found themselves there by chance.