

## Constructing Discoveries: An Interview with Thijs Ebbe Fokkens

Published on Artslant.com

*Den Haag, May 2014* - Since gaining consciousness humans have had the urge to find answers to their questions. People used to rely on seers, shamans, and priests but over time we became wiser and more professional in our attempts to gain knowledge. Thankfully, we no longer expect individuals to have the capability to develop into polymaths or Renaissance men with the ability to achieve an all-encompassing understanding of the world. We have entrusted scientists, philosophers, and artists with the responsibility to find and share knowledge, insights, and perhaps even truth. An immense network of these individuals, companies, and institutions move this quest forward, each within fields of research so specific that understanding the whole of human knowledge is still out of reach for the individual.

Notwithstanding this realization, Thijs Ebbe Fokkens has undertaken the challenge of building a utopian site where everything becomes clear. It is a concept reminiscent of Borges' *The Aleph*, but for Fokkens it is not to be found in his basement, but constantly created anew in combinations of drawings, photographs, and large-scale wooden constructions. The form of the sites he creates echoes the appearance of contemporary spaces of knowledge acquisition, research, and discovery: a combination of studios, excavations, laboratories, CERN, temples, boardrooms, and (anatomical) theatres. While almost movingly naïve in ambition, Fokkens' installations give us the opportunity to reflect on humanity's admirable hunt for truth and understanding, our methods of acquiring it, and the (im)possibility and (un)desirability of completing this search.



**Thijs Ebbe Fokkens**, *The Meeting of the Eye - a constructed discovery*, 2014, Time and site specific installation (wood, sand, neon tubes, photographs), approximately 5 x 5 x 2 m; Photo: Johan Nieuwenhuize; Courtesy Thijs Ebbe Fokkens

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**Manus Groenen:** *In your work you are looking for this utopian site. Am I correct to say that you are creating it, or is "discovering" more appropriate? Some of the works you make appear to be something in between a construction site and an excavation site. The former suggests the utopia you are looking for doesn't exist yet and has to be built and the latter suggests that it already exists but has to be discovered again.*

**Thijs Ebbe Fokkens:** This mix-up is actually what I am after in these "constructed discoveries." By changing codes, attitudes, and strategies (within the same space) I aim to expose a narrative of desires and promises that constitute these mythical and utopian places. I play on the idea of the necessity of Utopia to be pursued but never in fact realized. That's why it was (discovered) or will be (constructed), but never is.

**MG:** *So how we will reach this utopia remains consciously elusive, but your last remark makes me wonder about your views on the "when" of this utopia, because you say never. But by building your constructions it is made to exist. How you see your works in relation to time? Especially since you disturb their here and now quite often, for instance by incorporating earlier works in the form of photographs.*

**TEF:** With(in) my work I create another realm where time works a bit differently. I guess it's quite similar to the "supermoment" in which all the works of Mark Manders are supposed to exist. By creating such a realm with its own laws and logic you're able to detach and (re)connect elements from all kinds of realities. In contrast to Manders, my palette may include elements with links to a certain time and place in the world, although these tend to be processed to a great extent.

**MG:** *What motivated the decision to construct your bigger installations predominantly out of wood? Does this material have a certain relevance in itself for you?*

**TEF:** I'm a draftsman by heart and building with wood is to me closest to drawing in space, thinking out loud visually. Like on paper, I can make direct suggestions and preliminary sketches. And I like the tension between the plain, hands-on material and the ephemeral themes and ideas.

**MG:** *A recurring shape in your installations is the circle, a shape traditionally associated with perfection or completion, but also referencing sites of discovery like an anatomical theatre. In the latter, the site of discovery is situated in the middle and a lot of your works also seem to be centered towards the middle. To me it seems you usually place the audience outside of these circular forms. Is there significance in that?*

**TEF:** Even when the audience is inside the circle, e.g. in more naked installations such as *(w)hole in one* (2012) and *For Real* (2013), a big part of the work is inaccessible or imperceptible. References to another time, place, or circumstance for instance make for lots of holes in the story. Perhaps it's significant that when dealing with the audience and the presentation I like to think in lines of theatre. The Dutch word "voorstelling" can—besides "a show"—mean imagination, presentation, representation, and proposition. The methods of "make believe" specific to theatre can be useful to my intention to evoke something that exposes something significant. In this regard, I like the idea of an overtly complicit audience.



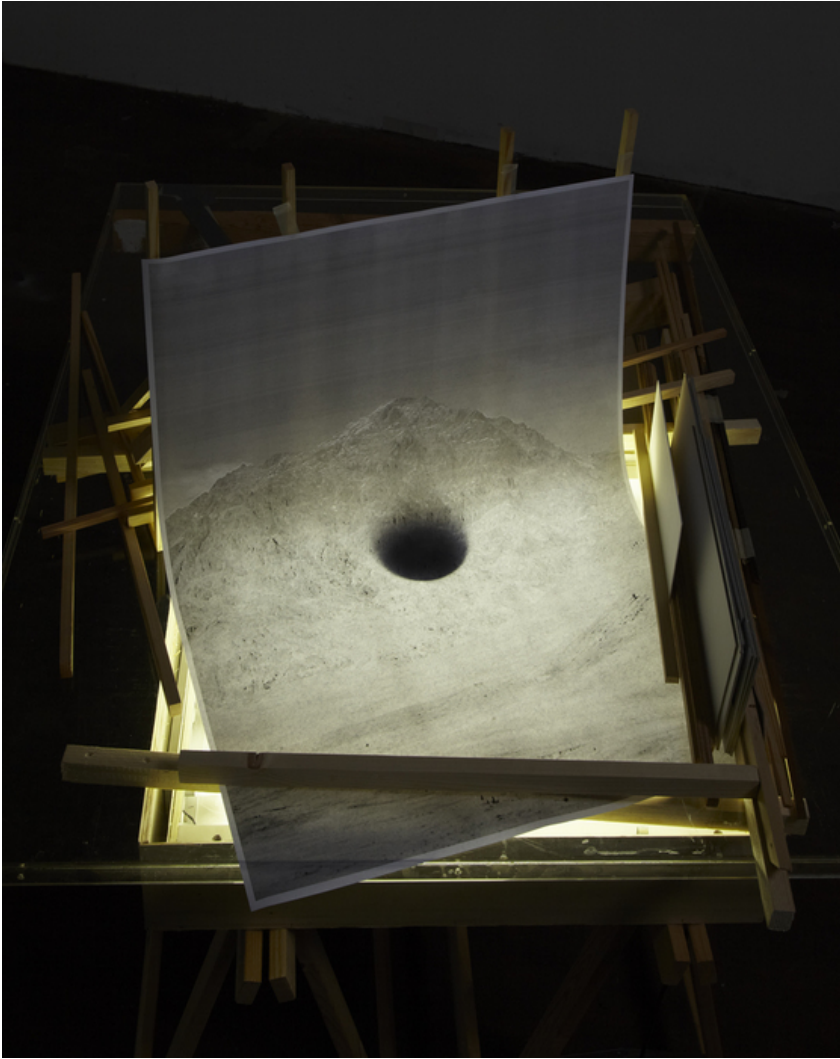
**Thijs Ebbe Fokkens**, *TOO BIG TO FAIL*, 2011, Limited photo-edition, dimensions variable, and time and site specific installation (wood, drawings, prints, rotating lightbulb), approximately 5 x 5 x 2 m; Courtesy Thijs Ebbe Fokkens

**MG:** *Your titles often allude to political rhetoric, financial systems, or scientific projects, as in TOO BIG TO FAIL (2011). How relevant is knowledge about such things to interpret your work? That also makes me wonder who would be your ideal audience? People who look at your work as art or theatre, or people from, for instance, science, who might read these installations differently?*

**TEF:** I realize a lot of the titles are a bit like slogans, very confident, while I'm very doubtful. They are promises and allusions, and they embed the work. They provide a context that may very well incite confusion or doubt, but I don't mind that per se. Each area/culture (science/art/theatre) tends to have different rules of engagement, if you will, with different levels of dogma. I wouldn't like to select an audience along those lines. My ideal audience is those for whom my work provides the means for speculation, association, and interpretation.

**MG:** *You more or less seem to search for clarity and answers. Your titles hint at certain phenomena and your installations appear to be sites where something is discovered, but they seldom reveal what that is. Isn't it mean in a way to not deliver the answers or clarity you promise?*

**TEF:** I don't think I search for clarity and answers. I evaluate desires for and promises of clarity and answers. Ambiguity is where I tend to end up by choice. It evokes a space. Not state a point. It's elusive, I understand it can irritate but I don't think it's mean.



Thijs Ebbe Fokkens, *Hole in One*, 2012, Limited photo-edition, dimensions variable;

*MG: Other artists do seem to look for answers of some kind, since research based artistic practice is increasingly present in contemporary art. You are also the founder of the artist initiative Locatie Z where the crossing of the borders between science and art has long been an issue before it became a trend. It seems art is increasingly seen as a site of discovery and knowledge production. How do you feel about that?*

**TEF:** I think art can for sure be a site like no other for reflection and orientation, for the development of ideas. I feel the biggest challenge is—as it is with fundamental science—to keep the market with a hunger for fast returns on investments at bay. The valuable kind of growth and innovation art brings is not easily measurable and scarcely directly applicable. It seems to remain hard for businessmen and policymakers not to dismiss that crucial part, without reducing art to merely a private matter of individual expression.

—Manus Groenen