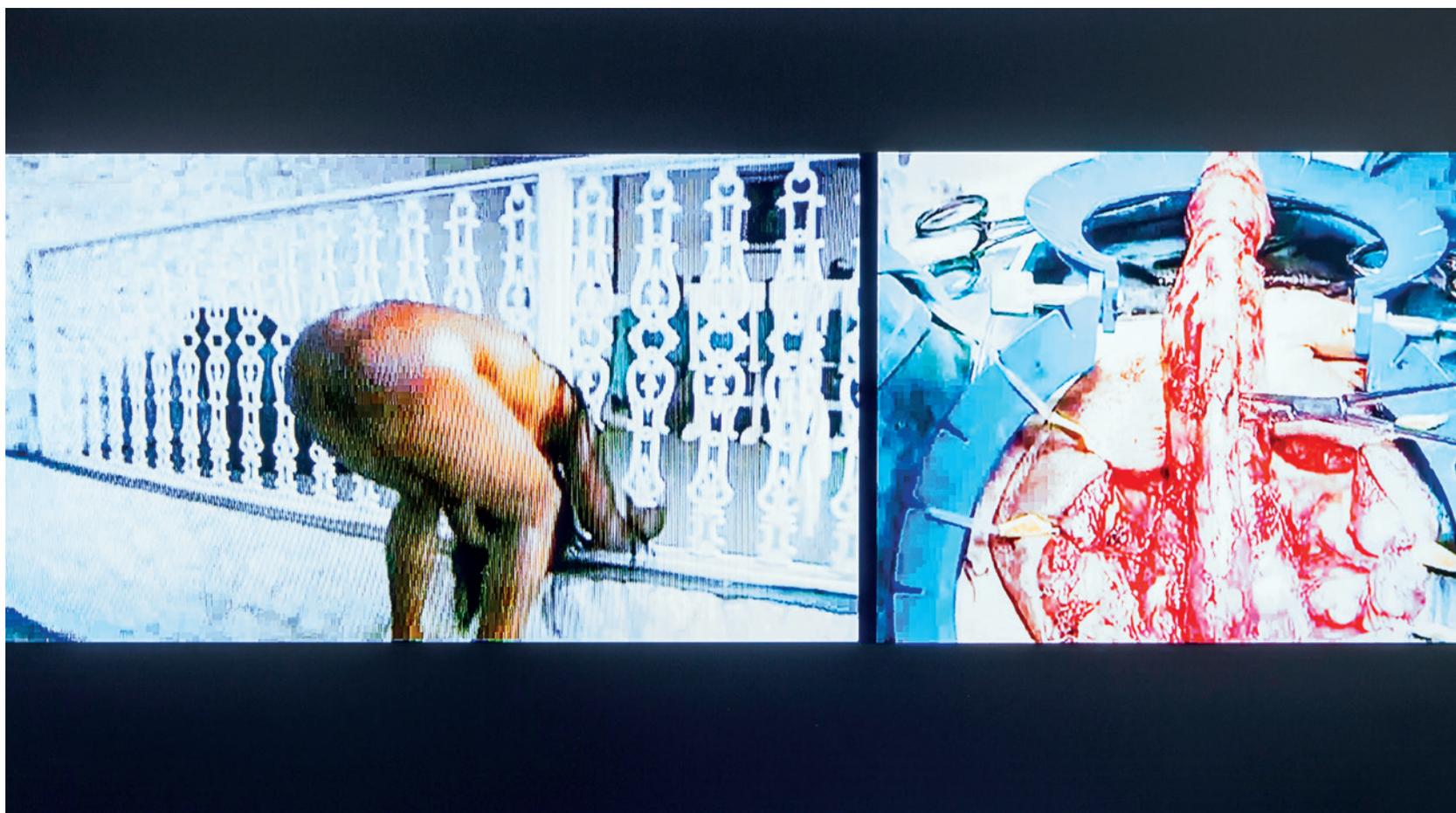


Language is an integral part of Evelyn Taocheng Wang’s work, not only as a linguistic presence in many of her drawings, paintings, and videos and the literary references that she takes as inspiration, but also in how she herself speaks. Words, sentences, mistakes, and corrections become a space to negotiate the relationship between fact and fiction, what could be almost be false or most certainly real. In the conversation that follows she speaks to Hendrik Folkerts about four women—Eileen Chang, Princess Kaguya, Virginia Woolf, and Evelyn Taocheng Wang—and how they manifest, in spirit or in actuality, in a number of key works she has produced since 2012.



FOUR WOMEN

HENDRIK FOLKERTS

One of my first encounters with your work was the video series *Reflection Papers 1–5* (2013–2014). You had recently moved to the Netherlands to participate in the residency at De Ateliers in Amsterdam, coming from Frankfurt, and prior to that, your hometown of Chengdu, China. These five videos felt like sketches in moving image, existential self-portraits that captured personal reflections on relocating to a foreign country, cultural assimilation, sexuality, desire, and the significance of making art in these new contexts, resulting in observations and confessions that showed your own ambiguity toward these issues. One key source of inspiration for these video works was Eileen Chang (1920–1995), the controversial Chinese writer who migrated to the United States. The titles of the individual works in the *Reflection Papers* series—*Moonlight*, *White Bird*, *Are you still young? Don’t worry, you’re going to be old soon*, *If you love flower, visit the zoo!*, and *Lover*—indicate a direct association with Chang’s observations of daily life. Can you say something about your relationship to Chang and her writing, and how her work played a role in *Reflection Papers*?

EVELYN T. WANG

A first way of answering this question is to talk about how Eileen’s works made me want to become her. During Japan-occupied Shanghai, in the 1930s and 1940s, to make a living she

wrote novels and criticism. The themes in her novels are mainly romance, love, and marriage. Her writing style is a two-dimensional narrative, a “list of images” as I call it, influenced by traditional Chinese literature, such as the Qing dynasty novel *The Dream of Red Chamber*, and by Western modern English literature, including W. Somerset Maugham (queer), Virginia Woolf (bisexual), and also Western films from 1930s Hollywood (macho). She said in her article “Writing of One’s Own”: “So my fiction, with the exception of Cao Qiqiao in *The Golden Cangue* (1943), is populated with equivocal characters. They are not heroes, but they are of the majority who actually bear the weight of the times. As equivocal as they may be, they are also in earnest about their lives. They lack tragedy; all they have is desolation. Tragedy is a kind of closure, while desolation is a form of revelation.”

Specifically her background and biography made me want to become her. She came from a powerful family background, but had a broken, sad, and violent childhood, although she got a very good education in Chinese traditional culture and Western cultures. She represents that bourgeois time of having a good education and good tastes, which were all eradicated during the Cultural Revolution. Today Chinese people want it back, but it is gone, so everyone needs to construct their own fantasy of history.

Making the *Reflection Papers* videos leads me toward her, makes me closer to her. It was the right time and the right place for me because I had just moved to Amsterdam, and I saw myself (still and forever) as an immigrant and an artist. I recalled my own culture from overseas, and at the same time I was learning many things from the art world in the Netherlands. It was the beginning of “being in the middle” between two cultures, between reality and my dream of being a successful artist in Western countries. My historical dreams—as an overseas Chinese, as a pre-woman, as an artist/self-imagined elite class (as opposed to today’s trashy interpretations)—all projected onto her and her writing. I saw myself as a strange figure, like Eileen said, “being in desolation, equivocal, in graceful statues and in loneliness.” I selected excerpts from her novels, and based on them, tried to film those “lists of images,” scattered collages into film, with my own voice-over that sounds like she is talking to me personally. Eileen passed away lonely in her apartment; the Los Angeles police found her body. She was

lying on a canvas camp-bed surrounded by her text works, dressed up, in an empty house without any furniture, but lots of her custom-made dresses, and a final note: “I will take wind and leave. Do not let people touch my body and send to cremation immediately, spread my dust into a remote area with no inhabitants; give all of my possessions to Mr. Song Qi.”

HF Were you ever tempted to paint or draw yourself as Eileen? Do you ever draw yourself?

ETW *Reflection Papers* could be a good example of me drawing myself onto Eileen’s portrait—like she is writing those texts, but I am the one holding the pen and controlling the ink, via the video piece. I took her writing out of context (her novels and essays), and then Eileen is drawn by my self-invented “comments” on those selected texts.

Right - *Two Sights of the Elegant Mysterious Unearthly Princess Kaguya & Her Beggarly Nurtured Aristocratic Life Before She Flies Away With A Shining Ship*, 2015, performance at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Photo: Ernst van Deursen

Opposite - *Reflection Paper No. 5* (still), 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam



For example, in the way I speeded up the voice-over to describe the golden eggs smashed into a golden basin in *Reflection Paper No. 1*, I tried to desynchronize the relationship between image and voice, and found myself there.

HF Let's talk about Princess Kaguya, the main inspiration for—and one could say, central protagonist of—your diptych film *Forest, a Man, a Baby & Aristocratic Life* (2015) and its performance counterpart that premiered at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, *Two Sights of the Elegant Mysterious Unearthly Princess Kaguya & Her Beggarly Nurtured Aristocratic Life Before She Flies Away with a Shining Ship* (2015). Both works are based on the Japanese tenth-century fairy tale of the bamboo cutter. Kaguya is the most beautiful princess, an alien, a feminist, and an adopted daughter of an ordinary woodcutter. Tell me about her.



ETW

The tale of the bamboo cutter is a Japanese *monogatari*, or fictional epic prose narrative. It is considered the oldest existing Japanese prose narrative; the oldest known manuscript dates to 1592. Based on this story, there are many films and theater plays relating to Kaguya's life.

First of all, she is not a human, but she tried to be. When she finally understood human beings, she suffered from the gap between being an alien and being a normal human on the Earth—although she was very beautiful. She also struggled with herself in that one day she would leave this earth and go back to where she came from, in space. Although we don't



know why she needs go back to the moon (the UFO comes and picks her up in Kyoto's palace), and there are no religious questions. Her existence is equivocal! In my two video pieces, which were used as a "wall screen" during the performance, I dig into her equivocal character, and use it as a parallel description.

Second, I am not sure if this story was written in ancient classical Japanese. The long distance of a language flowing in time, between contemporary interpretation and gossip of old times, gives us a wide space to dream about her. Kaguya has her own language, her way of facing concrete life challenges. She built up new meaning for a life, with its special aesthetics, and fabricated a new way of expressing herself. She didn't even need to learn an instrument but could play it immediately, she was so concentrated and so strong. I wish she will be able to see my performance and this video work if she comes back from the moon again.

HF What would she say?

ETW She might sound like the wind and say: "Evelyn, you are slightly mean, and your interpretation is shoddy, because that is you—you never feel grounded in reality, in real life!"

HF You appear in the film *Forest, a Man, a Baby & Aristocratic Life* as an ambiguous, mysterious figure that somehow mediates the space between Kaguya as a fictional character and you as, well, an existing character. Why did you choose to do this?

ETW The two short films describing Kaguya's subconscious world can be seen as independent video works or used for the performance. In *Forest, a Man, a Baby & Aristocratic Life*, based on the part of the story when the poor bamboo cutter found the Kaguya baby in the forest, I acted as a mysterious woman ghost standing by the lake and the black forest. That moment when the bamboo cutter saw her and touched her, sensitively, in a nostalgic mood, he felt like he had met her before, somewhere in an old memory, but not really. It is not a scene of "in reality." Unlike the original story, it can be reversed, like I thought it was Kaguya who found him, not him finding Kaguya. She is an alien, but she knows what she is doing and what she is going to plan—get a man, get a father, to find a reason to come to this mortal world. I could act her because I mixed it into my own background. So this scene is not mysterious at all but actually very down-to-Earth!

I think I play the cultural reference between Asian and Western. It was not a bamboo forest but the Black Forest where we filmed, where many fairy tales and philosophical theories come from. It is not a Japanese man but a blond Dutch actor. Kaguya remains forever an Asian woman—me, as an Asian woman living and working in the Western world, being dropped by a UFO sent from the moon,



Summer, 2017, Four Season of Women Tragedy installation view at Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, 2017.
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij

looking passive and spaced-out. Maybe it is her pretentiousness of being elegant and moderate. A masculine dominated Western rational man could find her and reach her with his passions, and then he found the Kaguya alien baby. This scene and my role in it has sexual, sensual suggestions.

HF A group of works assembled under the title *Massage Parlor* (2016) reflects further on your position as a Chinese woman living in a European context. At that time, you were working in a massage parlor in Amsterdam to make a living, but simultaneously exploring the parlor as a site where many paths, desires, and people intersect. Both a deeply personal piece as well as a more general reference to the status of migrant workers in the wellness industry,



Massage Parlor, 2016, Dorothea von Stetten-Kunstpreis installation view at Kunstmuseum Bonn, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Photo: David Ertl

Massage Parlor included massage tables and room dividers, drawings, and a performance in which you provided massages to “customers” of the Kunstmuseum Bonn in Germany, where the work was first exhibited. How personal was this work for you? And how did conversations with your coworkers and encounters with clients inform the piece?

ETW

It is a very personal work for me; it was part of my life. I don’t see being personal as dangerous or even taboo for doing art. This project draws on many “diaries,” for instance what I heard from my massage colleagues—about the customers, the interior design of the salon, the weather, income, and so on. They are all young and poor and powerless Chinese women who search for a better life in Holland. The language and style of my diary were pretty much influenced again by Eileen Chang’s writing style.

For *Massage Parlor*, conversations between my colleagues and their clients are the primary material, which offers references and inspirations for the related drawings, the paintings, and those curtain installations. The titles of the drawings are directly taken from conversations, such as *A Hong Kong-Dutch Client Licking My Arm during the Massage Treatment*. Those conversations were hollow, shallow, trashy, and sexual, but speak about the immigrant’s gender issues as a woman or a transgender. They reveal and at the same time hide the truth, which resides in personal problems and social problems, in intimacy and in a public space. When the “clients” were lying inside the curtain-bed, they asked me the same questions as those clients in the red light district in Amsterdam: money, where I come from, if I will provide sexual services for them, do I love to receive tips, why do I do art, et cetera. Those conversations, recalling my original massage diaries, were written down on rice paper and glued onto the backside of each painting I showed in this re-created massage salon. No one can read them because you can’t see them.

I also wanted to create an economy. The Kunstmuseum Bonn provided me a budget and an artist fee, so they are “the money.” I used them transparently, turning the art museum into a massage business site. What we earned inside there (including tips!) by giving massages to our curator friends, to art friends, to family, to academic professors, to museum worker guides, we gave back to the art museum. I signed an agreement with Kunstmuseum Bonn to rent

the room, and it worked exactly like any massage parlor business, except it was in the special real estate of the museum. The labor relationship between artist and art institution is often not so clear on the money issue. Eileen Chang said: “To sell your beautiful intellectual thoughts to people is not so much different from those who sell their labor, and their body.” So this parlor of Kunstmuseum Bonn became a middle space connecting the intellectual meaning of doing art/performance and the lower social labor of earning money. We are in the same boat!

HF The paintings that you refer to, on the backs of which you attached the transcripts of the conversations with clients, are reproduced images of antique Greek vases. Can you talk about how the Greek vase entered that space of the massage parlor?

ETW The Greek vase paintings were based on the real interior design of the massage parlor I worked at in Amsterdam. My boss decorated her own store with those trashy vase paintings that she bought from IKEA. She said: “They are Europe things, they are art! They are about the beauty of naked bodies, we are ashamed about it! And massage is also an art of naked bodies. We need those paintings for decorating our business! Bring money to me!” That was her personal understanding of Greek art and the body reator-business.

Not only you, but almost everyone was asking why those paintings were hung there. There was a condition before we answered your question. Every client had to fill out a questionnaire before they could have a massage treatment: “Do you think a massage will relax your body? If so, can it also relax your history?” or “Do you

Evelyn Taocheng Wang (1981, Chengdu, China) lives and works in Rotterdam. She studied classical painting in China, continued her education at the Städelschule, Frankfurt and was resident artist at De Ateliers, Amsterdam (2012-2014). In 2016 she received De Volkskrant Beeldende Kunst Prijs as well as the Dorothea von Stetten Art Award. Recent solo exhibitions include: Frans Hals Museum | De Hallen Haarlem, Carlos|Ishikawa, London, Chateau Shatto, Los Angeles, Tale of a Tub, Rotterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (performance). Selection of group exhibitions: ICA, London; Kunstmuseum Bonn; Manifesta 11, Zurich; The Kitchen, New York; Greene Naftali, New York; De Hallen Haarlem; The 9th Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai; Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Wang’s work is part of collections of: ABN AMRO; Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht; Stedelijk Museum Schiedam; Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

think what we are doing now, specially inside the art museum, is a performance? If not, do you think a straightforward massage business could be run inside an art museum?”

Greek vase paintings are based on the perfect human body. I vanished those bodies while I was making them, to invite real bodies into the space where they are hung. We see it clearly here that we are imperfect, we are human, we have emotions, we can do trashy things, we have dreams, we need money, we are tourists in this mortal world. Our sadness, our love, our cultures, and heavy, funny, dark individual stories are told through the process of massage. I hope it can relax your history. If ancient Greek was such a perfect concept of art, I do hope the massage parlor looks like a ruin.

HF Let’s turn to Virginia Woolf, who has a presence in your latest body of work, *Four Season of Women Tragedy* (2017), recently acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago. In this series of large-scale drawings, photographs, sculptures and agnès b dresses you create metaphors for female life and the tragedies that occur in small and seemingly fleeting moments rather than grand gestures. How did Virginia Woolf and her writing come into *Four Season of Women Tragedy*? I would suggest that Eileen Chang and Princess Kaguya appear almost as avatars in previous works; does Woolf “manifest” in a similar way?

ETW My English is still poor. You can imagine how difficult it is for me to read Woolf’s work, because my British friends say that even for them it is difficult to understand. But I did, I used an English dictionary. I would read a page, then try to figure it out and also remember what I had just read, then I wrote down the English words on paper and tried to remember them, like a high school student. I have read *To the Lighthouse* (1927). This book gave lots of inspiration for preparing and working on *Four Season of Women Tragedy*.

Woolf’s language is very poetic, sharp, and suggestive; it has many undercurrent structures, like collages of subconscious patterns from people’s minds. Her mode of storytelling is very feminine. *To the Lighthouse* focuses on the parent-kid relationship between painter Lily and Mrs. Ramsay. Lily is stuck and struggles with her own identity between parents. It mentions war, which destroys everything, including time. Lily finds herself through painting in the end. The theme of this book—almost all of Woolf’s books—is sad, remote, desolate, and tragic.

Virginia Woolf is my idol. She didn’t eat food—she always found some reason not to eat—she tried to kill herself, she was very strong, and isolated, she wrote *Orlando* (1928), which says sex can change! Her mind was intellectual and very sharp, her style of dressing up was very good! For this exhibition I used my own clothes, from the brand agnès b. There is a specific reason. Our era is way more trashy than Woolf’s time or Chang’s era, but maybe more free? They all were wearing clothes, I dare to say, very similar to agnès b. Perhaps it is my own fantasy or not. That’s why I said I am not a fashion person, because I only love agnès b designs. They seem to retain the mood of a kind of old European bourgeois chic style, very feminine. Maybe that is why the brand is so famous in Asia, especially Japan, because it is beautiful. It fulfills my own dream of being a skinny middle-upper-class woman and being intellectual in my own head. (Such classy women can be very trashy nowadays too, so I don’t see them as women in my head). Eileen Chang once said: “I do not like muscular woman. Men have more freedom and power than women, but if I choose, and only because men cannot wear nice dresses and various design of skirts, I would not like to being a man!” I think this phrase fits into *Four Season of Women Tragedy* too. Woolf, Chang, Kaguya are all there, they are there with me all the time!

HF The agnès b dresses, once worn by you, return in the drawings as clothing for the depicted female figures. How do they serve as connections—or interlocutors, if you will—between physical materiality and representation, between real life and fiction?

ETW For this body of work, I showed my own dresses and I made big drawings based on short tragic stories told by my female friends. I put the dresses on the ground, close to the drawings, so people will see that the dresses are actually in the drawings. They might want to touch the dress and touch the drawing with their own hand instead of watching them. I think these elements create an environment where our subconscious could swim in



Save my baby first, 2017, *Four Season of Women Tragedy* installation view at Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij



Jogging on Rotterdam Harbour, 2017, *Four Season of Women Tragedy* installation view at Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij

those narratives and see those related objects. Like when I read Virginia Woolf's book. There is a circulation inside of her words. Those female figures in the drawings are created as embodiments of women; they are my references and the results of my research on how to be a woman. Then I needed narratives to support those figures. I collected stories from female friends on Facebook and Instagram. And those stories are really "the connections." They are very personal and private. For example, my Chinese female friend sent me the old classical fairy tale "White Snake," and I used it as a theme in my drawing *Save My Baby First!*

Another one is less romantic and the morality is low: *A Horrible Daily Mail News with Summer Dress* (2017). My transwoman friend Yu-ka sent me a link from the *Daily Mail* that showed a picture of a woman's head steamed and resting on a golden classical Russian-style plate and decorated with cooked oranges and white goat cheese. There was another female hand touching it. The picture was taken in 2006. Next day the *Daily Mail* deleted this horrible picture for no reason. It refers to a real news story about a Russian cannibal family, a young military man who worked for an officers' pilot school and his wife. One day, a local cleaner found a cellphone while he was working and opened it, and he saw a picture of the young man biting a woman's hand. This cleaner called the local police. The cannibal family's neighbor told the policeman said that they were a very nice, happy couple, teaching students, ordinary and healthy. That steamed female head in the photo belonged to a woman who had an affair with this cannibal husband. They found each other on Tinder, then he and his wife killed her and cooked her after they had sex.



Four Season of Women Tragedy installation view at Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij

Hendrik Folkerts, recently appointed the new Dittmer Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, was curator at documenta 14 (Athens, April 8-July 16 / Kassel, June 10-September 17, 2017) from 2014 until 2017. With a focus on performance and scores, indigenous practices and Southeast Asian & Pacific art, he curated a larger number of new artist commissions and together with the team led by artistic director Adam Szymczyk, was responsible for the exhibition in Athens and Kassel. Prior to this, Folkerts was Curator of Performance, Film, and Discursive Programs at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (2010 until 2015). He studied art history at the University of Amsterdam, specializing in contemporary art and theory, feminist practices, and performance. From 2009 to 2011, Folkerts was coordinator of the Curatorial Program at de Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam. His texts have been published in journals and magazines such as *Artforum International*, *South as a State of Mind*, *Mousse*, *The Exhibitionist*, *Metropolis M*, *Art & the Public Sphere* and in various catalogues. Folkerts is coeditor of *The Shadowfiles #3: Curatorial Education* (2013), *Facing Forward: Art & Theory from a Future Perspective* (2014) and the journal *Stedelijk Studies #3: The Place of Performance* (2015).