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When sexuality becomes healing: An interview with Elsbeth Fraanje on her documentary Sexual Healing

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Abstract

This is an interview with Elsbeth Fraanje, the director of *Sexual Healing*.

Keywords

Disability, Sexuality

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When sexuality becomes healing: An interview with Elsbeth Fraanje on her documentary *Sexual Healing*

In *Sexual Healing*, the Dutch filmmaker Elsbeth Fraanje creates an intimate portrait of a middle-aged disabled woman, Evelien, who starts exploring her own body and sexuality. While the film discusses the topics of sexuality and disability, it is first and foremost about intimacy and being seen as a human being.

With *Sexual Healing*, Elsbeth Fraanje made her first portrait film. In her previous films—a film about religion in a newly built neighborhood in Amsterdam (*God op IJtje*) and a film about the little chapels along the German highways (*Snelwegkerk*)—Frannje used what she calls a “kaleidoscopic approach” that brings together the stories of many characters. *Sexual Healing* portrays only one character: Evelien, a 56-year-old disabled woman to whom sexuality is mainly an unknown world. The documentary follows Evelien in her search for intimate, sexual contact.

“I got to know Evelien through her daily caretaker. She had many conversations with Evelien about intimacy and sexuality, but then a bit like two 15-year-old girls who

are giggling about things. I visited Evelien in January 2019. She lived very small, animals everywhere. Our first conversation was a great conversation, very open. At that time I was still looking for different characters, both sex workers and clients. And I knew that she had to be one of the characters anyway. But I was then at a tipping point. Should I continue with my kaleidoscopic approach, with multiple characters and stories? Or should I make a portrait film with only one character? The making of a personal portrait film was new for me and I found it risky. I mean, when the relationship fails during filming or when someone simply doesn't want to continue: with a kaleidoscopic film you can go in different directions, this is impossible when you work on a portrait film. But from the first moment there was a lot of trust and I found that very special. She already indicated from the very beginning: 'If you want me in your film, what would you think if I did some sort of quest or journey?' That was exactly what I was looking for. Actually, I was looking for Evelien. It matched from the very beginning."

The journey became a search for intimacy, a search that, according to Fraanje, asked a lot from her as director and her film crew, especially regarding the camerawork. One of the biggest challenges was to create a non-voyeuristic setting for the viewer. The camera and cameraperson, Jefrim Rothuizen, were essential for this. "Jefrim is a really big guy, but he has the quality that he can make himself invisible when filming. During the recordings, he especially relied on prime lenses for close-up shots. This combination created a feeling that the camera lovingly contemplates and caresses the body. I think that this is especially important for the perception of this documentary."

Fraanje started this project with the working title *Wanted*, because "the documentary should be about being seen and being wanted." Later on, she chose *Sexual Healing* as the title. "When real and sincere intimacy happens, you become a more

whole person. Then you realize that injuries can disappear. Especially injuries that are in your head. The feelings that you are not valuable, that you are rejected, that you don't matter as a person. I think that is central to my work as a filmmaker. Are you being seen as a human being? As a person? That was the theme of *Snelwegkerk* as well. That is why I make movies. That is the common thread in my films. Ultimately, that is what we're all looking for. Do you know that notion of the 'god shaped hole' from Blaise Pascal? If that hole remains empty..."