

STEVE SCHEPENS



text context



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Interview with Carla Acevedo Yates, D.AWIRE art magazine, 2011

Hi Steve, it's a pleasure to speak with you once again! During our last interview, we spoke about the reasons that lead you to depart from painting and move to other mediums such as sculpture and performance. Since 2002, you have titled these works HORROR, but your recent work marks another departure with different and more complex titles, even though they also convey a sense of mystery and irony. Can you explain the reasons for this choice?

Dear Carla, the pleasure is completely mine! Indeed, the HORROR works form a very important and vast cluster within my oeuvre, also the new titles are rooted in there. The sculpture THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE IS A FRAUD which was first presented at the Art in the City exhibition during the ARTBRUSSELS art fair in April and the exhibition BLUE MUSSEL BINGE DRINKING at Marianne Friis Gallery in Copenhagen in June both mark the start of the new period. The art-works can be seen as anchors for future creations.

The show you have up right now in Galerie Van de Weghe in Antwerp is titled *The Bermuda Triangle is a Fraud*. Tell me more about your interest in this popular culture legend and how you came up with the idea for the show.

It started with the performances I've been working on during three years, between 2007 and 2009. I flew over the Bermuda Triangle, starting from a different angle each time, and returned. These actions were photographed and recorded; all the documentary materials were destroyed after the project was finished. The only photograph that still exists is the one taken just before take-off from Puerto Rico in 2008.

The legend of the Bermuda Triangle is not just a myth or a lie, it has several perspectives. For me, the invisible is just as important as the visible in an artwork, you can see it in the performances with the box on my head or in the performances within the sculptures and installations, etc. I use performance and even traditional sculpture techniques to represent the emptiness of the art object. I work with signs and icons of contemporary society. One of these icons is the Bermuda triangle. In my works, and also in THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE IS A FRAUD, I point out the subjectivity, emptiness and fragility of these signs and show the instability of a seemingly stiff society and the connected HORROR state of contemporary man. You see, since around 1945, the mysterious disappearances of planes and ships and their crews, are numbering in the hundreds. These have been attributed to the alien power of this stretch of water. Other voices however state the CIA was involved and again others say electro-magnetic pulses are the actual cause. The main point is for me, however, that they vanish or are believed to be vanished in this exact point for some mysterious reasons.

The performance videos included in the show, both *Nemo* and *Tables and Chairs*, are quite distressful to watch. Previous performances such as HORROR 56 also play upon the viewer's emotions and expectations, creating an air of suspense, and well, horror. How do you envision the evolution of your performance work? What are your current interests?

Since my first video performances THRILLER 1 and 2 that were recorded in my previous studio in Ghent, Belgium, wittiness and the aggressive are important ingredients. In these first videos I am slamming my head with a cardboard box on against the studio wall.

Tanguy Eeckhout, curator of Museum Dhondt Dhaenens in Deurle, Belgium, stated that my "(...) performances are a mix between horror and slapstick, between destructive rattans and laughing tics."

The performance HORROR 56, which you mention, is a situation which is created by a sentence on the invitation card, it read: "the exhibition HORROR 56 can only be seen by people with Tourette syndrome." The uneasiness of the onlooker is similar to that caused by the stainless steel Bermuda sculpture where three doors open to the inside of a triangular space, one can glance in but the entrance stays blocked.

Tables and Chairs with its lucid action, refers to the studio based performances, instead here the kitchen is the studio. This transparent performance was shown parallel to the live performance I've done with the Danish star chef Bo Bech at Mariane Friis Gallery in Copenhagen, where we were serving a specially created blue mussel dish.

My most recent performance at Galerie Van De Weghe in Antwerp, where I slam a 4 kg heavy octopus onto the Bermuda sculpture is rather contextual, conceptual, art historical, political and even auto-biographical. There are different kinds of performances all existing parallel to each other with similar ingredients.

In *Nemo*, you violently smash an octopus against your sculpture *The Bermuda Triangle is a Fraud*. Can you tell me more about the visual references and subcontexts present in this performance.

The octopus is another example of the vanishing. It spreads ink and poison to protect and hide itself, but also to attack. In this way, it is a perfect metaphor for the artist. Another reference for me is the *A dream of Fisherman's Wife*, a woodcut by Hokusai, where a woman is in an ecstatic embracement with two octopi. The Bermuda sculpture I am slamming the beast at, is the monolith of meaning.

In *The Party*, you construct a petrified pyramid of champagne glasses that mocks this celebratory act. Visually, the sculpture echoes the fraudulent Bermuda Triangle. How do you think this idea of deception plays into popular culture and rituals?

I believe, there's and there should be a Hrundi V. Bakshi on every party. You know that unbeatable character of Peter Sellers in the movie *The Party* from 1968. The exclusiveness of whatever highbrow event, the eventual fossilized spirit of both the champagne and the ideas and also the superficiality of talks and meetings are part of life and of the arts. So if there is no Hrundi, my sculpture should be the memento mori.

BLUE MUSSEL BINGE DRINKING by Mark Gisbourne, 2011

Numerous strategies of object displacement have always been central to modernism and the post-Duchampian universe of artistic production. Significantly, perhaps, it has also been a central concern of Belgian artists over the last fifty years, one has to think only in obvious terms to Marcel Broodthaers in the 1960s, and yet more recently artists like Wim Delvoye. Ally this to the fact that the history of Belgian Surrealism and the Magritte-an 'mystere', was often an indexical alternative to the Paris Surrealism of psychological automatism, eroticism, and fetishism, and we begin to get a take on Steve Schepens approach to art. In his work BLUE MUSSEL BINGE DRINKING, Schepens not only takes on the precedence of Marcel Broodthaers famous moule(s) works, but integrates them with collaborative performance, while also alluding to Yves Klein 'blue' and Spoerri-like 'snare pictures' from Nouveau Realism. If these form and abstracted historical background to this work, they do only in the sense of the indexical rather than merely 'simulated' or 'appropriative' terms. Personal biography, cultural association, and a self-articulated identity weigh just as heavily in BLUE MUSSEL BINGE DRINKING.

Cooking and dining form a sense of the horizontal or levelling, one might say a universal scene of human material interaction. After all when we choose to eat, we always eat something, and these materials called generically 'food' are subjected to those conditions that are necessary for their displacement and transformation. Therefore by working with the international chef Bech, a certain translation has taken place (mussels = moules = moulding of shaping), from restaurant to gallery, and gallery to restaurant. Appropriately the name of the restaurant is *Geist* translated to gallery and vice versa, an amusing Hegelian turn or simile that intentionally exhausts itself as soon its purpose is served. The notion of the chef has personal connotations on the one hand for Schepens (his father was a chef), and the performance of cooking the blue mussels takes forward the idea of association and transformation; the Belgian artist using a 'moules' precedent being made self-evident. The work combines notions of sculpture (the mussel pot – container of the process), conceptual procedures through drawing, and documentation through photographs and filmed video record. The performance before an assembled coterie of art world cognoscenti, with public spectators given access only to aftermath of the event – the gallery as a later distressed restaurant exhibit. While it intentionally hints of inclusion and exclusion, and on a much larger scale to the 'snare pictures' of Spoerri, it also opens up questions as to how the art contents must now be located. Is it in the processes and the record, or is it to be found in the indexical pointers (as signs) that constitute the aftermath of the sculpture-performance.

MUSSEL BINGE DRINKING (2011) is a work extending Steve Schepens use of sculpture and performance, expanding his earlier concerns with detritus and aftermath. In this work the collaborative, and issues of inclusion and exclusion, play a far greater part. Emptiness and displacement, signs and translation, nonetheless remain continually present in all his works.

Interview with Louise Steiwer, 2011**Which themes do you consider to be the most central to the exhibition Blue Mussel Binge Drinking?**

Main concepts of the performance and installation are art historical and political. By exchanging Marianne Friis gallery and the restaurant Geist and having the gallery director work as maitre d'hotel, I made a statement about the art work, its meaning and reception. The restaurant became an artwork, the selected public functioned as performers, the gallery as a restaurant, where famous star chef Bo Bech was invited to create a new blue mussel dish together with me. Actually the people inhabited the art work, were part of it for a short period during the lunch. They were experiencing the work literally by eating it and meanwhile being part of the installation. Later visitors of the exhibition would only see the leftovers from the lunch performance; nonetheless these remains have true sculptural quality.

Of course the main ingredient of the lunch is of great importance: the blue mussel. Obviously referring to *The Triumph of Mussels I* by Marcel Broodthaers, I continued to dwell on the Belgian identity, the concept of the mould (moule in French also means mould). Just as Broodthaers, I use traditional sculpture techniques to represent the emptiness of the art object. I work with signs and icons of contemporary society. In my works, and also in BLUE MUSSEL BINGE DRINKING, I point out subjectivity, emptiness and fragility of these signs and show the instability of a seemingly stiff society and the connected HORROR state of contemporary man.

Another performance I did the morning before the lunch: I signed the restaurant Geist, officially declaring it an artwork from the 25. June 2011 on. That was my response to the never-ending discussion if cooking really is art.

Can you explain the origin of the idea for the performance? How did it all start and how did it develop into the exhibition that we see now?

Art and eating have always been connected. After openings, gallerists or museum directors usually invite selected public (collectors, art professionals and journalists) to join the artist, to celebrate his success during a dinner or lunch. Sometimes collectors are invited to a preview dinner to meet the artist and buy works before the exhibition actually opens. The food in this case is a medium to generate the message, namely 'Buy' or 'Love this artist'. In Blue Mussel Binge Drinking the medium is the message.

Can you describe how the different elements of the exhibition (video, drawings, performance ect.) interacts with each other?

Each of the different media exhibited work with the concepts of my oeuvre. The video on display shows an empty hot cooking plate with heated emulsion forming different figures and vanishing into thin air. The drawings are concept drawings of the exhibition and frottages from Bo Bech's restaurant – from the front, the floor, the entrance, the door, etc. These were made after I declared the restaurant Geist as an art work and signed the front. The silk prints come from my invisible performance in 2009 – similar to this performance, it was only experienced by a limited number of visitors: one gallerist, one collector, one museum director and one art critic were invited.

THE BER.MUDA TRI.ANGLE IS.A FRAUD by Dr. Ekaterina Rietz-Rakul, 2011

Steve Schepens has recently started a new series of works beside his known HORROR series (all previous works of the artist were entitled HORROR with an additional number or subtitle). Nevertheless, the idea of a contemporary man being lost in the labyrinth of meanings and icons as well as the impossibility for the spectator to find any access to the meaning of an artwork – keep on preoccupying him. Moreover, the intertextual nature of Schepens' work, his fascination with philosophy along with high-brow and pop-culture receive even more obvious manifestation in his choice of titles. They are ironic and unexpected. At times, onlooker has to make a long journey through a sematic labyrinth to find the hidden Minotaur of a meaning.

The recent exhibition at Van De Weghe Gallery shows a variety of works by Steve Schepens: sculptures, drawings and performance videos.

Nemo is a videowork which integrates Schepens' large-scale steel sculpture *The Bermuda Triangle is a Fraud*, the artist smashes a large octopus against it. The animal is an allusion to the fantastic monsters out of Jules Verne's book and also to Hokusai's *Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* (the drawing shows a woman in ménage à trois with two octopi). Fiercely smacking one fraud against the other Schepens makes evident that ideas and frauds, when materialised by humans for whatever purposes, can cause and feel real pain.

The Party is a sculpture inspired by glamorous pyramids constructed out of champagne glasses to be artistically filled with sparkling nectar on classy parties. The glasses of Schepens' party, though, are filled with grey mud: frozen and stiff concrete. Deprived of its ephemeral glamour, the Party becomes rather a *Memento Mori*, than an immediate celebration of life. If it does celebrate life, then in an oblique way, saying: *carpe diem, darling, as long as you can.*

Chairs and Tables is a black-and-white video which, as well as most of works of the artist, fills its spectator with uneasiness and eeriness. The onlooker surely asks himself, who are these guests sitting on the chairs at the tables outside the frame of the video camera and waiting for their seething, hissing, disappearing food in the flickering black-light. Unlike in his *Nemo* work, this time the artist decided to be merciful to the viewer. If already the cooking feels so ghostly, it is probably better not to see the cook, not to mention his guests. .

Sculpture as a Map by Elena Sorokina, 2011

The Bermuda Triangle is a Fraud, the sculptural installation by Steve Schepens, can be considered a record of an expedition, as several trips - more precisely flights - stand at its origin. Between 2007 and 2009, the artist took three flights, all of them following the edges of the infamous Bermuda Triangle, between Miami, Puerto Rico and the Bermuda Islands.

If most travellers look for authenticity of places or people, Schepens' pilgrimage went to a highly fictitious location: no geographic authority officially recognizes the triangle. The myth and its map emerged in the US in the mid-fifties: *Bermuda* is a resolutely "modern" occidental popular legend. The "tales of Triangle" feature some dramatic time-space shifts, freak waves, electromagnetism and alien forces - and are often discussed as manifestations of the US Cold War paranoia. The real mystery, however, is how the Bermuda Triangle became a mystery at all and how it continues its virtual life in the blogosphere as an endless play of evidence-counter evidence and the impossibility of evidence as such.

Schepens uses this *manufactured legend* for his work. Balancing between deconstruction and mimicry, he mapped the triangle by the trajectory of his flights. Subsequently, it became the floor plan of his minimalist sculptural construction. Bermuda's map, of course, is as fictitious as the tales related to it and its aerie, all terms of equation being constantly varied by multiple authors and adapted to their desire to prove or to counter the horror arguments of *vanishing in the Bermuda*. After having conducted several *experiments in vanishing* himself, quite unsuccessfully, Schepens translated this experience into the sculpture. The three doors of his triangular minimalist cabin block each other when being opened; they invite the spectator to enter, yet at the same time bar the access. The inner space of the triangle remains near but unreachable, we cannot enter it and *disappear* from the outside. Based on a performative gesture of real trips to a fictional place, Schepens' work alludes, among other things, to the real *horror* of our facebooking present - the sheer impossibility to vanish.

VIEHL DOLKERS by .APES, 2010

La boîte-en-valise, an art work from or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Selavy (his alter ego) from 1935-1941, is a box containing a portable museum of Duchamp's oeuvre. One can open and close it, take out art works and show to others. The box is a predecessor of USB sticks, external hard drives, iPhones, blogs and internet sites where people store and display their personal things such as photos, memorabilia, amateur and professional art in Portable Document Format, JPEGs, Powerpoint, etc. and transport it all around the universe. In Duchamp's case the contents are a series of signed and numbered reproductions and miniatures of his oeuvre. In the case of VIEHL DOLKERS, an exhibition at Volker Diehl Galerie, Berlin, the box looks like an overseas (art) transport crate, a giant boîte-en-valise, which contains original art works by twelve different artists. Outside of the box, various reproductions with reference to shown art works are displayed.

The exhibition structure of VIEHL DOLKERS transports the content, just like Duchamp's suitcase, but is too large to be carried by a single person. The content however is limitedly accessible and can only be viewed through peepholes in the box. The situation reminds of Wittgenstein's thought experiment, where everybody is talking about a beetle which each interlocutor supposedly has in his box, while no one can look at each other's hidden content. The beetle in Wittgenstein's experiment stands for mind, pain and other individually grasped things. In the VIEHL DOLKERS box, contemporary art is the beetle. We all know it, we have all seen it. But we just know fractions of it; we are too close to get the picture. Nevertheless we keep on talking about it. The word art can only mean whatever is in the box, and thus VIEHL DOLKERS provides you insight in this crucial and difficult concept.

The Voyage of the Beetle by Dieter Roelstraete, 2010

First, an introductory reflection on the changing fate of Ludwig Wittgenstein's influence on contemporary culture, occasioned by the observation that the current exhibition has some apparent link or other to "Wittgenstein's beetle." Disregard if so desired, dear reader, but return at the top of the following page:

"Back when she was a philosophy student in the early nineties, her first encounter with the ghost of Wittgenstein was not a terribly auspicious one. She wasn't particularly good at (or interested in) logic, and this being a philosophy department with something of an international reputation in the field of logic and the adjoining realms of the philosophy of science and mathematics, what little Wittgenstein was actually served up to them concerned the Viennese philosopher's (admittedly epochal) achievements in these fields alone. Concentrating on the incomprehensible middle section of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (that is to say, the *logical* part rather than the *philosophical* part) and on the handful of writings that presaged and/or accompanied his return to philosophical pre-eminence at the helm of the Wiener Kreis, there was little or no room in this picture of the prodigious, tormented thinker for his considerable feats in the domains of aesthetics, ethics and the philosophies of language and psychology. "The world is everything that is the case"; "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world", and "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent": it is easy to see how she, as an aspiring literary person with limitless confidence in the possibilities of writing and speech, came to misread Wittgenstein's characteristically blunt, forbidding statements as insults or assaults directed against the forces of poetry. Oh, the resentful arrogance of those logical types!

At some point, however, our young philosophy student experienced something of an epiphany (this more or less coincided with a growing insight into the mysteries of higher mathematics): perhaps the *Tractatus* itself should be read as a poem first and foremost? Perhaps Wittgenstein himself was the greatest lyricist among philosophers? Interestingly, such a novel appreciation of the Wittgensteinian legacy was very much a sign of the times: sometime around 1993, 1994, all of a sudden the philosopher's name appeared to be on everyone's lips, and his influence slowly started to spill over the anxiously guarded borders of academia, until it even reached the shores of the broader intellectual culture. Ray Monk's landmark biography *The Duty of Genius* was especially influential in this regard, because it painted a lively picture of the man behind the mask, clearing the path for the success of both Bruce Duffy's brick-sized biographical novel *The World As I Found It*, and Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein*. Thomas Bernhard's *Wittgensteins Neffe* was translated into half a dozen languages, playwrights turned his life into best-selling theater plays, architectural buffs published monographs devoted to the modernist house he built for his sister in Vienna (which today houses the Bulgarian embassy), and – perhaps the most significant of all, for our present purposes – Joseph Kosuth created a vast installation titled 'The Play of the Unmentionable' at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, following closely on the heels of the Kosuth-curated exhibition named 'The Play of the Unsayable' at the Wiener Secession, a couple of stones' throws away from the house in the Kundmanngasse."

Why Wittgenstein had become such a redoubtable critical force all of a sudden is a question too complex to be answered here, but it seems he never really left the cultural sphere since. And so here and now, after Wittgenstein's poker ('the story of a ten-minute argument between two great philosophers'), his birth house ('a family at war'), his encounter with ten-year old Adolf Hitler ('the jew of Linz') and his hut up in the Norwegian fjord-side village of Skjolden, our attention is drawn to his *beetle*. Why? And who or what is this beetle anyway?

Here's what an online source has to say in this regard: "in his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses an analogy in an attempt to clarify some of the problems involved in thinking of the mind as something over and above behavior. Imagine, he says, that everyone has a small box in which they keep a beetle. However, no one is allowed to look in anyone else's box, only in their own. Over time, people talk about what is in their boxes and the word "beetle" comes to stand for what is in everyone's box."

The organizers of the current exhibition are of the opinion that, in the VIEHL DOLKERS box – more precisely, in the set of boxes on view in the Volker Diehl Gallery – "contemporary art is the beetle." And so the visitor is greeted, upon entering the gallery, not so much by contemporary art, but by boxes *containing* (or, more importantly still, *claiming* to contain) contemporary art, engaged in a muted dialogue, it seems, as to what in this constellation of boxes best expresses the *idea* of contemporary art – its beetleness, so to speak, glimpsed and glanced at through a peephole so tiny as to appear almost perfunctory, a mere prop or theatrical ploy.

This commendable project is obviously not meant as a mere language game (the question as to what contemporary art really is, is too important), but I am tempted to follow the Wittgensteinian gaming spirit nevertheless –

Modern (*and* contemporary) art's most famous peephole, and hence also its most famous box, is, of course, Marcel Duchamp's *Etant donnés* (I'm thinking of Duchamp, inevitably, because of his *boîte-en-valises* as well – but also because he is a quintessentially Wittgensteinian artist) a wooden door behind which lies a work of art by now so famous that there hardly is any place in it for Wittgenstein's beetle (if that beetle is meant or supposed to represent a sense of mystery and enigmaticalness). Unless, perhaps, if these beetles are shown to hail from the Cupedidae family or Archostemata suborder – in which case they are certain to feast on the box' wooden lid. Indeed, has anyone considered the xylophagic instinct in many a common beetle?

Many more boxes litter the annals of art history, of course – Robert Morris' *Box With the Sound of Its Making* is another fine example, as is (in some sense) Piero Manzoni's can of *Merda d'artista*. And how about Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, the work that famously led Arthur C. Danto to experience the epiphany of the Hegelian end of art, back in 1964? Another famous box, this time taken from a domain more closely connected with that of Wittgenstein and his entomological thought-experiment, is the one containing Erwin Schrödinger's fabled cat. And not just a few exhibitions have been curated since that show crates alongside the artworks they came shipped in... In all these cases, the box simply stands in for the impermeable shroud of mystery that envelops (in Manzoni's, Morris', Warhol's case) the idea of art in the post-Wittgenstein, post-Schrödinger world. Where the box actually coincides with the idea of art, the container itself is the work of art, its contents rendered curiously irrelevant. Where it doesn't, however... Then what? Are we looking at, in or through?

HORROR 56 at Baronian_Francey Galerie, Brussels by Tanguy Eeckhout, 2010

The Avant Garde art and architecture of the 60s offered us the cerebral aesthetics of the minimal. Stripping the image left almost nothing more than the space and the spectator. Obviously the artwork was still present, but its physical presence completely vanished in space. The further stripping of the visual language has however always been the result of good intentions: renewal and maintenance of art to meet the 20th century ideal, to reach the essence and to get rid of anecdotic symbolism. On the margins of development of minimal art some very peculiar events have happened which disclosed the obscure side of the *aesthetics of nothing* and pointed out where art was navigating to. One of the most radical answers to the development of the 60s was without doubt the project *Cycle of Experimental Art* by Graciela Carnevale¹ in Rosario on 7. Oktober 1968. The visitors in the empty gallery did not know what would happen until the moment the artist put a lock on the outside door and imprisoned the visitors in the small gallery space. Passers-by witnessed but could not interfere. After a stressful hour with rising climax the prisoners broke free by smashing the front window. The gallery was left with broken glass. Thirty four years later, in September 2002 Santiago Sierra - self-designated minimalist with feeling of guilt - did the exact opposite. The new space of Lisson Gallery in London was closed hermetically with wave plates. Visitors of the gallery did not know what was happening or hidden behind the facade. Sierra's action, however minimal, and its meaning were all but informal.

The uneasiness existing from such fundamental derailments of minimal art is driven to a radical culmination point in the oeuvre of Steve Schepens. In his work Schepens forms the void by limiting, putting barriers, hiding, casting, and temporary breaking boundaries with sound performances... Through entitling all his work since 2003 as HORROR with an additional number; the content of his artistic thinking is pronounced powerfully and not at all ambiguous. Horror and the void are connected since a long time by means of scientific and artistic definition: *horror vacui* or fear of the void. In science of Old and Middle Ages horror vacui describes nature's Angst of the void: a spot of soil soon gets bewildered with new vegetation; a vessel of fluid fills with oxygen² ... The same goes for the image in the arts - it needs to be loaded to reach an ultimate composition. In Schepens' oeuvre the horror of the void is not solved. On the contrary, it becomes an existential trial; for the visitor a sort of thriller, a sequel to minimalism. The void however doesn't remain an abstract definition, but loads itself with aggressive undertone. The vacuum developed in the exhibition space forty years ago is thus actual more than ever and becomes an ominous experience. Strange enough one of the materials he uses the most is the ever present cardboard box, residue of our consumption society. He folds a three dimensional piece into a two dimensional one and materialises the void enclosed by the box. HORROR 14.1 was a bronze cast of the inside of the box, HORROR 14.2 a porcelain variant and for HORROR 14 he used plaster casts of cardboard boxes. Other works such as the HORROR-Fences series are cut out cardboard fences limiting space.

¹ One year later Graciela Carnevale together with several artists from the Grupo de Arte de Vanguardia de Rosario decided to stop producing art because everything was already done and art had reached a final point.

² Source: wikipedia.org

In HORROR-Fence #12 the three dimensional fence becomes a two dimensional stainless steel sign on the wall again – sharply cut and polished materialisation of illusory meaning. Barrier and impenetrable spaces are plastic strategies Schepens regularly uses focusing on the problematic of space. Hidden or impenetrable spaces evoke uneasiness, especially when things happen or can happen inside. The noise performances amplified by KRUAGRE, a band Schepens often works with and whose sound seems to spring from the most profound circles of hell, took place within cardboard barricaded spaces of HORROR 3 and HORROR 14. This enclosed threat seems to burst out of the installation and enhances the stress. The aggressive and threatening undertone in the work of Steve Schepens coexists with absurdity and impotence. He combines powerful signs with fragile absurdity: fences are cut out of cardboard, X-Barricade modules are constructed out of glass or light, or built from empty cardboard boxes... The content of his actions unveil the impossibility to reconcile human fate and social norms of contemporary society. For example his performances with cardboard box over his head banging against the wall or the video where he penetrates the cardboard box with his penis and eventually burns the box. His performances are a mix between horror and slapstick, between destructive rattans and laughing tics.

This slapstick horror Schepens culminates further in his exhibition HORROR 56 in Baronian_Francey Galerie by enclosing the works with a textual invitation for people with Tourette Syndrome. They are the only people who can see the exhibition. Possible symptoms of people who have Tourette syndrome which fascinate Steve Schepens are coprolalie - involuntary cursing, threatening words or obscene language and copropraxie - involuntary obscene gestures¹. The most known example of someone with coprolalie is for sure the comic figure Captian Haddock from the comic albums Tintin from Herge. These reactions seem to be hilarious in case of Captian Haddock, but in real life they evoke awry situations, difficult to cope with. Thus Steve Schepens creates uneasiness in mind of a spectator, who is planning to visit the exhibition and actually unable enter not having the syndrome. At the same time this uneasiness can become bigger when one realises that everybody in the exhibition space can have the syndrome and a social stress situation can occur every moment overloading the event in a devastating curse tirade.

¹ Source: wikipedia.org

Interview with Carla Acevedo Yates, D.AWIRE art magazine, 2010

Steve, it's a great pleasure to speak with you about your work and your upcoming projects. Since my first encounter with your work, I've been fascinated with the way you title your works. They are always titled HORROR with a specific number or subtitle attached to them. This adds a sense of theatricality to your work, that together with your installations and performances, conveys to spectators a sense of disquieting apprehensiveness. Can you further explain this choice and the ways the etymological weight of this word plays on your work and creative process?

Carla, the pleasure is all mine! I've been using the HORROR title since 2002 when I stopped painting, as I felt that this medium didn't transmit my concepts any more. Then the first HORROR-Fences were made, which form a basis for the whole HORROR period. Since then I work with signs and icons of contemporary society. My oeuvre indicates the subjectivity, emptiness and fragility of these signs and thus the instability of seemingly stiff social systems, which causes to anxiety and HORROR of a contemporary man.

Your work often deals with the opening and closing of space in a physical but also metaphorical way. For instance, you often construct fences to close space or use the casting process to reveal the void or non-space. Can you tell me more about the ways you approach space in your installations and sculptures?

For me invisible is as important as visible, if not more. As the invisible contains secrets which make a viewer anxious either to disclose them or to escape. The installations treat space in an architectural way, the sculptures function rather as objects. But both give new perspectives on the space were they exist. Casts of boxes make invisible inexistent matter solid and opaque, fences and large site-specific installations make formerly visible and free closed and unapproachable.

Your first works were mainly constructed with cardboard and makeshift materials, now you are using glass and steel. Can you tell me more about this shift in materials?

I want to show how the meaning of the sign does or doesn't change with a new material. I used cardboard as a non-colour, glass – because of its transparency and polished stainless steel as a mirror. I also use mirrors for some sculptures in combination with TL-Lights. All the works - despite seemingly fragile materials – function as insurmountable barriers.

Many of your installations, including HORROR 30, are constructed as stages. This obviously ties in with your performative work. Can you talk about the ways you incorporate the performative into your installations/objects and vice versa?

Most of my performances are also invisible. Either filmed in my studio or happen live hidden in the installation. The studio ones are solo performances with cardboard boxes; the live ones are amplified by e.g. a metal band, reguetón performer or classic musician. The live-performances are filmed and later silk-prints of video-stills are made on the original cardboard of the installation. Like this something ephemeral becomes an object.

It's true! You did come down to Puerto Rico a few years back and did a piece with a reguetón performer. How was that experience? Tell me more about the project?

I was in San Juan in 2008 on invitation by curator Paco Barragan at the Circa art fair with my German gallery. However I was also participating in a group show initiated by a friend and colleague Charles Juhasz Alvarado. The exhibition took place in a neighbourhood known for transvestite prostitution. I made an in-situ work: perspective drawings of reflection of the rooms on all mirrors in the house in lipstick. During the vernissage of the exhibition I invited a reguetón performer to reflect upon this work and sing about it looking at himself and the audience in the mirror, while I was greeting the guests with a lipstick kiss. I very much liked Puerto Rico, the people and its art scene, looking forward to go back there and sip fresh juice on the market.

You have an upcoming exhibition titled HORROR 56 at Galerie Baronian Francey in Brussels, where you will be doing a performance which will only be available for viewing to people with Tourette Syndrome. Why close the performative space to a specific medical demographic? Can you explain the performance?

You know, Carla, in this case the invitation is already the performance. So I appropriate the visitors' minds – during the exhibition they have to think that they are missing something and that they would have to perform to be able to see it.

That's interesting, it seems that here the performative as invisible, as opposed to just being physically hidden from the viewer, is taken to a purely psychological level. Roles are reversed, as the viewer becomes the performance and the artist the spectator. Isn't it a little frightening to think that someone would pretend to have Tourette's to see a performance? Are you curious to find out what happens? What are your expectations?

The artist is always the first spectator of his own work. The art work, be it performance, sculpture, painting, etc, also performs. Thus in art roles are constantly reversed. Fear is an emotion which artists use, and so is boredom or horror. HORROR 56 functions as a framework for my exhibition. And of course the invisible is very present in my oeuvre. It was exciting to see how people would react to this work, although my expectations were not high concerning the participation of the spectator, in contrast to let's say people attending performances in the 60s and 70s. However, talking to you now, after the opening of the exhibition last Saturday, I can acknowledge that the work had a lot of influence. The subtitle of the work was 'The vocabulary of Captain Haddock', a famous character from the Tintin comics by Belgian author Herge. Captain Haddock is kind of suffering from Tourette syndrome, however one can also appreciate his attitude and the plasticity of his outburst. Herge invents a completely new language for Haddock's curses and body gestures. Rewarding enough, after the opening I ended up at a birthday party of one art professional whose father was best friends with Herge and he showed me some incredible collector's item albums. And not to forget, my exhibition was parallel to the exhibition of Robert Crumb, the cult comic author, at Baronian_Francey Gallery. Another good example of cartoons showing excessive language and figures. My work around Tourette is thus an attitude which could be the solution for Art.

HORROR by Stephen Riolo

My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture or of art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone.

-Joseph Beuys

Over the past eight years Steve Schepens has created nearly forty projects, each with the title HORROR followed by a number or subtitle. It seems then only fitting to begin this review of his creative production with an explanation of that word which haunts the artist's projects. "Horror" entered the English language via French from the Latin *horrere* "to bristle with fear". This came in turn from even earlier Sanskrit root "to bristle" as the skin does upon shock. There is clearly a sense of discomfort inferred in the root meaning of the sensation this word infers, as implied in the tensing of the skin or "hair standing on end". The numeric addition at the end of Schepens' titles implies both a developmental progression and an inherent calculability or stylistic unity amongst his work. Their numbering could be interpreted to represent instalments of a greater unified body of work, each as percentages of a total, revisions or additions of single work, or markers for locations within the conceptual map of the HORROR concept. In any case, Schepens' work contains multiple threads which feed into each other and run throughout all of his works.

One major theme, which runs through the vast majority of Schepens' work, is the concept of defining borders or boundaries between the work of art and the audience or between zones of the exhibition space. In his work with fences, Schepens has created a series of objects based on the graphic image for the "white picket fence". Constructed out of cardboard, this symbol of choice, the fence, is named in his serial format HORROR#1, HORROR#2, etc. Each fence is linked to each other to confine or divide zones of the exhibition space. In contrast to the usual use of fences to provide a linear barrier or board whose crossing is controlled by the existence of a gate or opening in this fence, the fences of Schepens close onto themselves. They are sculptures which encircle and define new internal spaces within the exhibition room. Made out of cardboard, a very frail material, these fences act more to graphically define space determined by the artist than to restrict actual passage into them. It is then no surprise that subsequent editions of these fences have been systematically transformed into flat visual icons. Reproduced in metal or paper wall works, these flat icons of a fenced in area or region divided by fences arranged on an axis tell us more about the need to describe the interior space contained within the fences than the fence as an object itself. The creation, control and investigation of interior space is the second sweeping motif seen throughout Schepens' sculptural and performance work. When flattened into totally graphic representations of a fence encircled spaces, Schepens' HORROR 6 or 27 become

visual icons for a space of entrapment or control. One might notice the fleeing icon which wall papers the background of HORROR 27 as a miniature representation of a running figure whose upper body is covered in a box. This graphic icon seems to be a symbol for Schepens himself during his performances when he places a cardboard box over his head and tries to break through the cardboard walls of his performance space. This figures flight into or out of this fenced space, defined by the artist himself, brings out the dominating character of manmade boundaries, as well as the sharp edge stakes of the fence which both protect or incarcerate the figure within space, both deterring intrusion from the exterior and threatening figurative impalement from the interior. These sharp borders are repeated in Schepens HORROR #12 where the fences are turned into a three dimensional object, more approximating a razor ball than a fenced in space. Appropriately HORROR # 12 is partially painted blood red.

Schepens' next step was to create anti-tank barriers, something a little more direct in its implications than a cardboard fence. These anti-tank barriers, seen first from Schepens as sketches of the giant metal anti-tank barriers, called the Czech Hedgehog, were originally fashioned out of sharp metallic points that make them impossible to overcome or over run without risking serious damage. These imposing barriers are constructed and presented by Schepens out of paradoxically weak materials easy to destroy. Fashioned out of card board, glass and later out of neon lights the works take on a light and symbolic quality, that distances them from their actual functional design. Unlike the fences, these works define a clear off limits zone or separated area within the exhibition space. But while Schepens anti-tank barriers do define a clear boundary or no go zone with in the exhibition, it is the frailty of the material of their construction, glass in the most revealing case that inverts their power. In HORROR 1.1 glass anti-tank barriers fill a room of the gallery. They are positioned aggressively, with their sharp sides pointed out but cannot hold the space they are meant to define, as they are in effect translucent forms that remind us more of the playful effect of the symbolism of Neo-Pop art than weapons of war. The next incarnation of these anti-tank objects, HORROR 1.2 was constructed above a mirrored surface out of florescent lamps. At this stage, the border defining idea inherent in the object has been completely overcome by its compositional form and material. It no longer defines a boundary in the exhibition space at all but rather stands a unique visually engaging sculpture within the space. This light sculpture has taken the concept into a deeper level, where the object has been transformed through the effect of pop into a friendly or familiar representation of a cultural icon of war. In this case it is an object of defence turned into an object of glamour and playfulness.

Though his body of work Steve Schepens loves to use and abuse cardboard boxes. As an installation material Steve has used collected card board boxes to build abstract public monuments or cover the interior surfaces of his performance spaces. He integrates his body into these spaces and occasionally wears a cardboard box during his performances.





The Bermuda Triangle Is a Fraud (2011) Corten steel sculpture with TL-lights
previous page: Nemo (2011) C – print

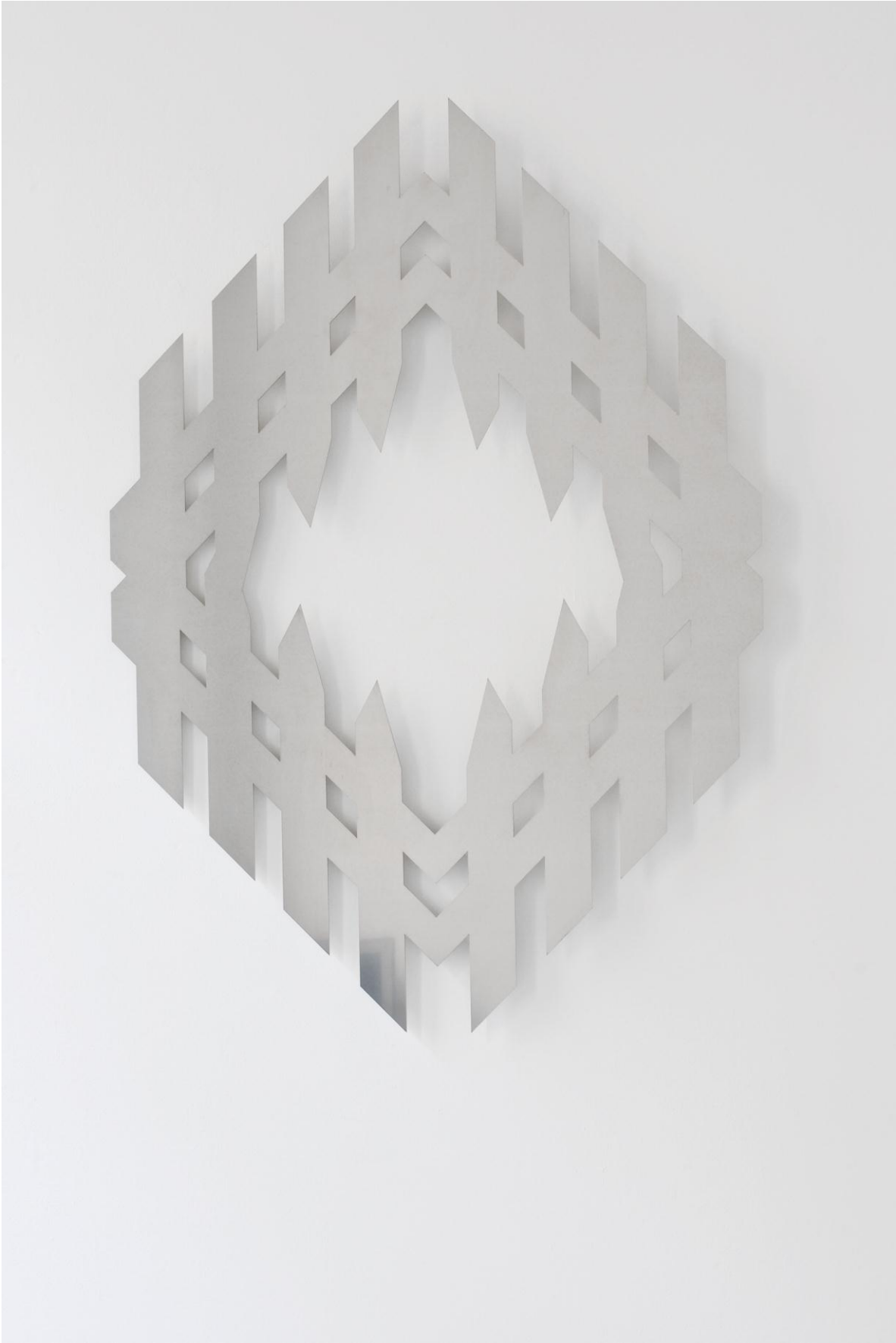


The Party (2011) Glass and concrete sculpture



Sobbing for BOSS (2011) Mixed media Installation
next page: The Steel Parade (2011) Mixed media installation
page 23: HORROR#13 (2010) Stainless steel sculpture





Beyond the cardboard boxes used as a material for constructing stages for his physical performances Schepens has also explored using the box as a model or mould for the creation of sculptural objects. The artist has cast bronze, plaster and porcelain models of these cardboard boxes or their interiors. The physicist Schrödinger's asserted, that the space inside a closed box cannot be understood without altering or destroying it; that is to say that our mere investigation of an unknown situation alters its existing parameters. It is in a sense also to say that in order to examine an unknown space completely one must try to replicate and in the process destroy or irreversibly alter the space. In the case of Schepens this grasping of the unknown is performed through inspection of form and void. To fill an unknown void, in this case the interior of a delivery package with a substance, is to both destroy its interior void and to grasp that void by converting it into a solid object. In a sense it is to capture or contain the unknowable parameters within the physical body of this new cast art object. Like the definition of interior and exterior spaces made through his fence series and the contradiction of material and form in the anti-tank barrier series, this series of casts of the hidden spaces of delivery packages, knits together the theme of defining and managing the unknown, and perhaps the horror or at least uncertainty that the unknowable evokes in us all.

Throughout his entire oeuvre of Schepens negotiation of known and unknown spaces may be the true basis for his repetitive titles, what is after all more horrifying than that which cannot be controlled because it is not perceivable, inspected or controlled? Mystery is then the topic of Schepens work, as it is the mystery of the unknown and his reaction to that mystery which forms the conceptual thread that runs throughout all of his creative production. For example, in the "The Exhibition That Never Was" Schepens performed a lengthy and complex performance in a closed space without allowing any audience to view his performance. As such the artist has exercised a complete control over the unknown. He has made a statement as to the events that will transpire with in this closed exhibition space and created works from the objects effected there in for the audience to interpret. This is perhaps the ultimate application of control over the unknown as it puts the artist in the position to create and then describe the unknown to the audience which can only assume that this event did take place as the artist describes. This play with transparency is also a trend we see interlinking of all the HORROR works. Still as is the case with all that cannot be known but must be inferred or associated through deduction, there are thousands of thematic references which emerge from and interconnect the works of Schepens. Perhaps this is simply because each work is an attempt to define, grasp or control the mystery of the unknown. Schepens work *Pandora's Box*, encapsulates this drive to control and observe the unknown as a culturally sanctioned taboo, immortalized in the well known myth of the same name.

Schepens' version of Pandora's box was in fact fashioned from boxes he had gathered from the area surrounding his secret performance, demonstrating that it is simply a matter of constructing and reconstructing the void or the hidden from the mundane world around us, which can activate this mythological theme of the artist revealing the taboo mysteries of the world around us.

As in the course of previous performances the artist, protected by a cardboard box, slammed his head violently against a wall. The damage to these boxes was highlighted in their subsequent presentation as future sculptural or graphic art works.

Schepens has constructed mounted mixed media wall works from the debris of a similar past performance. Binding this performance work even more closely to his mixed media and sculptural work, the cardboard boxes used in this past performance were transformed into mixed media wall pieces as black ink was applied to cover the surfaces of the boxes to reveal their creases and rough skin, crushed and warped during Schepens physical performances. This ink reveals the brutality of the physical performance, while images from video recordings of these past performances have been silk screened in glow-in-the-dark ink onto their black ink fields. These glow in the dark highlights from past performances, show glimpses of Schepens secret world and of a hard rock band that accompanied him during such a performance. They also appear as simple off white figments in day light but glow brightly in the dark, portraying ghostly obscured images and fragments of scenes from this past performance work.

The Exhibition that Never Was by Thibaut de Ruyter, 2009

A professional conscience

One evening, just after visiting a major retrospective exhibition dedicated to the work of Otto Mühl, I met a fellow art critic at a vernissage. That same morning, I had read his exhibition review column for a prominent art magazine. I don't know why, but I found something about his text unsatisfying. Everything was there: the works exhibited, the ideas, his brilliant style and intelligent content; yet his column left me with a strange and inexplicable taste in my mouth. While we were talking, with a glass of wine in hand, I shared my thoughts with him. He looked down at his shoes, a little ashamed, and admitted: "Yes, that's normal. I know exactly what the problem is. It's simply that I haven't seen the exhibition ..."

Trapped

Today I find myself in the same position as my illustrious colleague. Luckily I can admit this right now: indeed I'm not going to be the only one to comment on this work [HORROR 14 (ghost-exhibition)] without having seen it, since Steve Schepens has decided not to open his performance on 24 January 2009 to the public. (Also, today is 23 January, so I am writing about a work that hasn't even been performed yet!) If I am now to engage in this largely unethical exercise, then it is because I am constrained and forced to do so by the artist's own decision. The De Bond art centre in Bruges will, for a few hours, provide the setting for the filming of the performance, certain images and excerpts from which will be exhibited at a much later date at the BE-Part in Waregem and then again in Bruges. For now though, I must believe what Steve Schepens tells me about him giving a musical performance lasting under an hour, accompanied by saturated guitars, a beat box and a smoking cannon. Indeed the simplicity of the unseen wooden and cardboard construction created by the artist for the filming (an installation which will be assembled and dismantled in a day) certainly makes you wonder whether Schepens has already filmed the evidence for his performance elsewhere; somewhere in Ukraine, Berlin or Los Angeles...

Images

After all, who can visit every biennale, exhibition and gallery? In the world of modern art, people are used to talking about works that they haven't seen or works that they have only glimpsed through photographs in a magazine; even if this means generalising and inventing, lying and deceiving or sadly repeating what they have overheard at the vernissages!

Word on the street

From Joseph Beuys to Yves Klein, this is not the first time that an artist has refused to allow the public to access his own exhibition, leaving visitors standing on the street, frustrated and curious to know what is going on inside. It is precisely this kind of scenario that leads to the creation of myths and legends. (HORROR 14 is incidentally based on the legend of Pandora's Box). The success of an artistic venture becomes wholly dependent on anyone who is likely to have seen it. They repeat what they have seen or caught a glimpse of to other people, who in turn repeat what they have heard to yet more people and so on and so forth... Everyone tries to add something, increase the scale of the work (even though they have not seen it), enhance its historical significance, develop their own enthusiastic interpretation or add details that were not there and that had no reason to be. But this time, the audience wasn't even invited. So we have to believe Steve Schepens when he tells us that tomorrow he will create chaos in the De Bond exhibition space, assemble a large number of reclaimed cardboard packing boxes and give a performance which will last about an hour; and that he will then use the same boxes to produce the silk screen prints for his upcoming exhibition. More importantly, we must thank him because, the fact that no-one is going to see it, makes it much easier to write about this exhibition that never was. Like my colleague, you just need to show a little imagination and inventive spirit.

Special effects

Steve Schepens tells me that he will injure himself during one performance. With a box on his head, the artist will hit his head violently against the walls of the exhibition space several times. He will then be carried, with the box still on his head, to a gallery where he will start the process again. This will be repeated several times in the same evening over several hours. But how will I know that it really is him wearing that box? It could well be a stuntman under there equipped with a safety helmet. We have all seen the black and white video in which Chris Burden shoots a bullet into his arm. And would the work be any different, better or worse, if it was just a cinematic special effect?

Images

Suddenly I find myself asking: what is the point of exhibitions? We hang several works together on white walls, try to find a concept that vaguely links some essentially absurd ideas, attempt to sell the items hanging on the walls one by one and then – before dismantling the exhibition and delivering the works to collectors or returning them to the artist's workshop – we take a few photographs. All that remains then is to print these images in a catalogue (accompanied by a text similar to the one that I am writing now) so that the whole world can read about the existence of an exhibition that never was.

Proof

Where would modern art be if some element of the genre was preoccupied with the idea of proof? Would we need to create convincing pieces or material objects in order to prove that events really did happen? There will be no witnesses to tell us about Steve Schepens' exhibition (unless some of the people assisting the artist with the project decide to talk), so we will just have to believe that tomorrow everything will happen exactly as the artist has described to us. But can we really believe the claims of today's artists or the images that they produce? Worse still: can we believe what the critics write?

The Capture of a Town at a Gallop' by Patrick Ronse, 2009

My first encounter with the artist Steve Schepens was in Bredene in 2005. The St Sebastian shooting club provided the backdrop for a conversation with Philippe Van Cauteren, the director of the SMAK. Bredene was at that time putting itself forward as offering residences for young artists, and Steve Schepens was the first to be given a studio in a rescue station on the beach. Steve spoke about his work at length. Videos of his performances were shown too. I remember one performance in which he repeatedly bumped hard into the wall of his studio with a cardboard box over his head. He had also hung cardboard banners over the railings of a bridge in Bredene with such phrases as Welcome Horror, Welcome Tim and Welcome Bratkov. I also remember a photo showing members of the bench of aldermen posing next to the inscription Fear not art will save. The artist, again with a box over his head, was flanked by the councillors as if they were apostles.

Soon afterwards, the provincial authorities of East Flanders awarded Steve Schepens one of the Provincial Prizes for Art. This resulted in a monumental installation, an altarpiece in the style of the Van Eyck brothers and Hieronymus Bosch, but one that has got out of hand, in the splendid halls of the Caermersklooster in Ghent. I was fascinated by the highly individual manner in which Steve Schepens worked on his oeuvre. But I was mainly, and immensely, captivated by the twilight zone between artistic proposition and iconoclasm in which he works, or in other words by the interaction between creation and destruction.

Schepens preferred Berlin to Belgium. With the exception of a short period at Netwerk in Aalst, and a performance given for a private collector in Kortrijk, we heard little of the artist in this country. In the meantime he gave some notable performances abroad, among other places at the MARTa Herford museum in 2006 and at the opening night of the art fair in Basel in 2007.

About a year ago Be-Part set up an ambitious project on the work of Steve Schepens. A partner was sought and found in the curator Michel Dewilde at the cultural centre in Bruges. All those involved joined forces to create three projects: HORROR 14, 30 and 44. These projects were connected by a complex interplay of references.

Schepens' return to Belgium was introduced by an impressive performance of slightly over an hour, called HORROR 14. He presented it on 24th January 2009 behind closed doors at De Bond creation and exhibition space in Bruges. Schepens built an installation, Pandora's Box, especially for this performance, with used cardboard boxes he had picked up in the surrounding area.

In this and other performances by Schepens, it is not only installations that play an important part, but also the Belgian metal band Kru agre, which has accompanied him since 2003. Kru agre does not perform songs but composes pieces for each specific installation. In this way they only underline the specific nature of each of these installations. Each intervention in a building is a work that is not repeated.

¹ From a press release dated 9th January 2009: 'Waregem enhances its reputation as a horse town with a new logo and the slogan 'town at a gallop'.

The extraordinary thing here is that the visitor does not see the members of the metal band. So attending a performance may initially be somewhat frustrating, though this soon gives way to a sense of curiosity.

About two years ago, the art critic Gerrit Vermeiren wrote the following piece for the Netwerk arts centre in Aalst, which felicitously summarises Steve Schepens' work: 'Steve Schepens analyses fear and mental blockages as constructions in physical space. In a series of videos and filmed performances he explores the boundaries of horror and thrillers, two concepts and film genres that he often uses as titles for his work. On the one hand he thereby focuses on an aspect of entertainment, on suspense, fear and horror as a Hollywood process. He plays with the clichés of the old horror film, such as the fatalism in the outcome of the narrative, the wide-angles views and the cardboard sets (quite literally, in Schepens' case). On the other hand his work does actually have an aggressive undertone, an atmosphere of immanent and sensed danger, and he examines the intimidating nature of our present visual culture. When Schepens creates installations (or a stage setting for a performance), recycled cardboard is usually one of the materials. It is a cheap, flexible and above all neutral material that the artist employs as a canvas or projection screen and as a visual or actual barricade. The use of cardboard makes the objects represented seem fragile, but at the same time they acquire a more general validity and remain equally intimidating.'

What Gerrit Vermeiren does not mention is that Steve Schepens is a painter by training and that his work arose out of painting. In this respect Schepens likes to refer to Brunelleschi, the architect and sculptor who took measurements of classical buildings in Rome and studied their constructional elements and spatial effect. In order to get everything down on paper properly, Brunelleschi had to develop linear perspective. He was the first person to use vanishing points where all the lines of vision meet. This development had a huge effect on the arts, not least on painting, because it meant that two-dimensional paintings could be rendered in a three-dimensional plane.

It was on the basis of Brunelleschi's linear perspective and the aesthetic choices a painter makes (or does not make) that Schepens started using cardboard, in a non-colour, and gates, which act as a metaphor for the transition from two- to three-dimensional. In Schepens' work, playing with dimensions often leads to ingenious allusions to perspective. If we look at Horror #3, we see that the artist is trying to 'adjust' what has been achieved as a result of perspective. Whichever angle you look at it from, the correct effect of depth in the gate seems almost to question itself.

But that is not all. The cardboard boxes are containers. The texts, words and marks printed or written on the boxes are functional until the moment the boxes are delivered to their destination and have completed their task of communication. After that they take on a formal significance. Oddly enough, from that moment, the recent cardboard boxes assume the nature of 'artefacts' from an indefinite past. One might say that it is Schepens' interest in semiotics, the theory of signs, that led him to the use of cardboard as a medium.

The gates are also signs; they represent a full emptiness and an empty fullness. Above all, these structures act as demarcations, boundaries and enclosures. As foldable sculptures, the gates refer to Flemish garden gates, but they can just as well be associated with Gothic and the Flemish Primitives.

Note also the presentation of the gates in the exhibition cellar (crypt) at Be-Part, where they are shown as if in a museum of early or religious art. This makes one think spontaneously of gilt reliquaries in mediaeval cathedrals. This austere room only adds to the sacral atmosphere that surrounds the works.

Steve Schepens plays with the notions of visibility and what is invisible yet present. The Kru agre metal band can be heard but not seen (as in Wagner's music, where the orchestra remained unseen). The silkscreen prints on cardboard for the HORROR 14 performance in Bruges only reveal their secrets when bathed in light. And when setting up the exhibition at Be-Part, the other existing works by Schepens that were not shown turned out to be just as important as the pieces that were.

Schepens' work also makes reference to Friedrich Nietzsche, who was initially a fan of Wagner. Nietzsche refers to two Greek gods, Apollo and Dionysus, and associates them with the contrast between two principles: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Dionysian embodies chaos, the all-destroying, ecstatic intoxication. It is the primal source of creation, which is still without form. The Dionysian has a tense relationship with form. It is the task of the opposing principle, the Apollonian, to keep the Dionysian in check.

It is thanks to the Apollonian principle that the artist is capable of creating artistic form. Without this power to give shape to things, the artist is unable to express the overwhelming inspiration, the boundless intoxication of the Dionysian, in a form. So, according to Nietzsche, art is a synthesis of feeling and form. The Apollonian and Dionysian principles should ideally be united¹. According to Nietzsche, it is this mutual necessity, the pursuit of reconciliation between the Apollonian and the Dionysian that led to a climax of Greek culture: the birth of Greek tragedy.

In the performance, and by extension in the whole exhibition at Be-Part, Steve Schepens unites the Apollonian and Dionysian principles. Schepens recognises the danger of unbridled intoxication, which leads only to chaos. It is by means of Apollo's intervention that this intoxication is kept under control and transformed.

Steve Schepens the artist knows his classics. The environment in the main room at Be-Part symbolises the Trojan Horse of Greek mythology. Because the Greeks remained unsuccessful in capturing the city of Troy, the hero Odysseus thought up a trick. The Greeks built a gigantic wooden horse in which they hid some of their soldiers. They left this horse in front of the city gates in the evening in the hope that the Trojans would take it inside the city walls at night. The rest of the story is well-known: the Trojans fell for the trick, breached their own wall and brought the horse into the city. Later that night the Greek soldiers came out of the horse to open the gate for the rest of their army. The capture of Troy was accomplished².

¹ Van den Braembussche, A.A., *Denken over kunst, een inleiding in de kunstfilosofie*, Uitgeverij Coutinho, Bussum, 2007, pp. 113-115.

² With thanks to Pieter Vansteenbrugge.

Bathhouse for Steve by Paul De Vylder, 2008

In Albrecht Dürer's *The bathhouse*, a woodcut from 1497, six naked men are posing. They are hanging around – a renaissance quirk – about a perspective window, which, in the front opened like a can of sardines, functions as a display window. One man is playing the flute, another plays the viola, and a fat man drinks beer out of a mug with a lid; two men in the front seem to be engaged in a staring competition. Somewhat apart from this group of five men, the sixth man leans in a sensualist contrapposto against an impressive pillar. The pillar has a bronze spout. The stopcock on the spout has the form of a rooster. In vernacular a stopcock is called 'little fellow'.

Conversation piece or allegory? The four temperaments or the five senses? The back of the bathhouse has been opened out as well: from behind a wooden fence one is presented with a view of a town with towers and ramparts. There's some minor traffic, a couple of ant-like persons are making gestures; one single peddler on the road, one woman fetching water from a well. No noise, no chariots, no dogs. Is the woman carrying the water towards the bathhouse? *Paysage moralisé?*

How do we read an image from 1497? What do we get to see? What is to be seen, can only be seen *over the edges*: this is what Dürer seems to be saying. Over the edge of the dismantled wall in the front, over the edge of the wooden fence in the back of the image. Exactly at the triangular jags of this fence the spectator is holding his position, a marginal figure inside the image. An indefinite, untimely figure holding his position at the border of the front stage and what takes place behind his back. Amidst the lazy loitering inside the bathhouse and the trivial, barely sensible movements in the almost abandoned town, this mysterious figure is all concentration: he tilts his head, he seems to keep himself upright at one of the wooden poles which shore up the wooden roof as well as the toothed fence. In relation to the picture plane he is our counterpart: a figural mirror image. Over the edge that he is occupying he sees the mirrored version of what we observe via the parallel but inversed border.

How do we read an image from 2003? The bathing men have disappeared. Gone, the anatomy of their posing bodies; gone, the borrowed gestures, the pathetic gazes, the readable attributes; gone, the dense foreground and the suggestive background. *The fences are displaced!* (meaning: the tables are turned.) When the image has been cleared, when the image is but a remnant, or even just a souvenir, what do we get to see? What is there to see in 2003 which we, apperceptively numb spectators, would call an image?

'The border of the image', Steve Schepens says. The border, for example. Where the figures have left the picture, let us not perform any melancholic rituals because of the emptiness of the image; let us throw a party, a disturbing feast on the borders of the image. Disturbing: at the same time blunt and subtle, arrogant and ambiguous. Look: the bathers have vanished, the bathhouse is empty. No more houses, no more town, no more horizon, no more clouds; even the contours, the aesthetic game of light and shadow, have vanished. Everything is dissolved, swept away, left blank! Only the fence is present, just a fence: a perception enclosure. The latticed limit over which there is still some view possible. The mere possibility of a view beyond.

The fences are displaced, the tables turned: no whispers, no aura, only a small cardboard object; no arcane insinuation, just a do-it-yourself toy; no orphic hymns in the background, but a toneless, speechless box; a sharply cut wrapping. Disposable. Cut in the right size, the right scale, neat and clear, light and pliable; transportable. Horror! Steve Schepens calls these small liminal objects 'Horror'.

Horror-fence-one, Horror-fence-two, Horror-fence-three.... Apocalypse now in the form of a box thrown away, a retrieved sign, a repetition, an item, a #

Horror is dreaming that you are already awake.

.....

Красный корень by **Dr. Ekaterina Rietz-Rakul and Steve Schepens, 2011**

Purgatory. Red Root

Krasnyj koren' (Russian for "red root") enhances male potency, cleanses the body of heavy metals, neutralises free radicals and is believed to cure numerous diseases. It can be taken in form of herbal tea or, better, a tonic from genuine, preferably Ukrainian, vodka. In twenty-four hours the vodka will have changed colour, odour and taste and the effects will be mesmerizing, energizing and inspiring. Such was also the enterprise undertaken by Andrei Loginov, Byelorussian artist living and working in Berlin, and his neighbour and colleague, Belgian artist Steve Schepens, who curated a contemporary art exhibition in Donetsk *Donetsk goes Contemporary*. With an international group of artists whom they invited for an exhibition, as Jinns in the bottle of this industrial city, the creative collective has changed its content; however the content also changed them, as you will read further on in this epic tale.

Circle 1. Kiev.

The first exhibition we have viewed in the Ukraine was Cinthia Marcelle's (1974, Brazil) solo show in the PinchukArtCentre. Marcelle is the winner of PAC's *Future Generation Art Prize 2010*. Three more exhibitions were opening at PAC that evening, namely the 20 shortlisted artists of the PinchukArtCentre Prize, the collection presentation entitled *Collection Platform 2* and solo exhibition by Ukrainian artist Oleksandr Roytburd.

Marcelle presented two works: a video *The Century* and an installation sculpture *See to be seen*. *The Century* is part of *B Series*, a project about order and chaos. It shows an empty street, after a couple of seconds, objects, mostly construction worker's tools and accessories, start being violently tossed into the frame. 'The accident reveals something important we would not otherwise know how to perceive'¹. In this video, the artist seems to be provoking an accident by destroying the objects, in the good tradition Dada and Fluxus.

The site specific installation *See to be seen* stands in contrast to the video, however both works influence each other. 'All dust of the world we sweep underneath the carpet', said Marcelle during her artist talk. So here it is, a giant carpet spread out from wall to wall, going up the hill or rolling down the valley – choose yourself. It is a sculpture to experience, to sit or lie upon, to toddle on "not with shoes, as with shoes one does not experience the structure as good," the

¹ S. Lotringer, P. Virilio, *The Accident of Art*, New York, 2005

artist tells us while we are all nonchalantly hanging around on this dust-scape enjoying the conversation on a lazy afternoon in the capital of the largest country in Europe where who knows how many mistakes have been swept underneath the carpet.

Second exhibition at PAC presents the works of twenty shortlisted Ukrainian artists. The opinions about the exhibition featuring such young artists in an institution such as PAC are quite polarised; but if there is no contemporary art museum taking up the task showing the young generation, a private institution has to. Even at risk, that the quality of art will not always be profound. Among noticeable artist there is Zhanna Kadyrova (1981, Kiev). A member of the infamous R.E.P. group (Revolutionary Experimental Space) exhibited three huge cut-outs from an asphalt road. Obviously, some village in Eastern Ukraine will encounter permanent transportation troubles for the next decades, since all the funds for EURO 2012 have already been ~~stolen~~ used. The asphalt cut-outs are presented as paintings on the wall, but one can still feel their weight. Of extreme wit was the sculpture outside the entrance of the PAC: a ball of asphalt about 150 cm in diameter on the pavement. Another promising young artist is Volodomyr Kuznetsov (1976, Lutsk), also a member of the R.E.P. group. His installation painting for PAC consisted out of large black'n'white and red wall paintings based on a historical etching representing the Koliyivshchyna rebellion of Ukrainian Cossacks and peasants in 1768.

And there is Mykyta Kadan's (1982, Kiev) white Soviet stela, a mere ascetic depiction of what used to be an ideological display, which now fails to please its leaders by turning out pale and dry, smothered between the walls and ceiling of a contemporary art institution.

In Kiev our protagonists also met Kateryna Botanova, director of the Foundation Center for Contemporary Art in Kiev. The institution known as Soros Centre for the Arts had closed its doors in 2008. Now reformed into CCA, it sees its goal in facilitating the information flow orbiting contemporary art in Ukraine and internationally; they organise talks, meetings and manage an educational platform. CCA also publishes an online magazine for contemporary culture called *Koridor*, the printed version of it is planned in the near future.

Circle 2. Donetsk.

Donetsk goes contemporary

Donetsk is gradually sinking because of the mining tunnels; many of its buildings are leaning like Pisa Towers. Amidst of the buzzing working city stands the leaning newly build Green Plaza office tower. During the last three weeks, an empty unfinished twentieth floor of it has been the melting pot and epicentre of life for several artists from all over the world; they worked and met to eat dry fish with beer there.

Santiago Sierra, Matt Mullican, Sergej Bratkov, Dejan Kaludjerović, Vadim Vosters, Franz Rodwalt and others have presented their new site specific works.

Izolyatsia, Platform for Cultural Initiatives

The Eastern Ukrainian city Donetsk has about a million inhabitants and, to be frank, not much interest in contemporary art and artists; except for a few initiatives run by passionate individuals such as Liubov Michailova's *Izoliatsia* on the outskirts of the city, next to a terrikon, one of the city's numerous slag heaps which appear as a result of mining. The art centre is situated in a former plant on the outskirts of Donetsk. When Loginov and Schepens visited the impressive site together with artist couple Igor Gusev and Nata Trandafir, the temperature dropped well below zero and there was no kiosk within sight to buy Ukrainian Cognac.

The current exhibition by Cai Guo-Qiang *1040m Underground* involves coal miners from Donetsk and salt miners from Artemivsk, as well as several traditional painters. The latter were asked to produce portraits of miners, which Cai Guo-Qiang then altered with gunpowder. As a result, the large scale installation is presented in the Gallery Space of Izolatsia. Hundreds of tons of coals on one side and salt the other side with altered portraits 200 x 300 cm amidst. An even more impressive installation is to be found in the second factory building, which had suffered from minor fire which painted its walls black. In the middle of the space, there is a row of mine carts transformed into rocking cradles. Inside the carts, decorated with found materials such as musical instruments, tools, children toys etc., a selection of old films is projected.

Here is an excerpt of our conversation with Mrs Michailova:

Can you tell us about your first encounter with contemporary art?

Contemporary art museums and galleries have been a part of my life for a very long time, so I don't really recall "the" confrontation with contemporary art. There was, however, one show that triggered a certain thought process, which eventually led to me founding of IZOLYATSIA. The exposition was called Chen Zhen: The Body as a Landscape and it was a type of a retrospective at the Kunsthalle Wien in 2007. I was really touched by the sensibility of Chen Zhen's works, and how the issues that he depicts in his creations concern all of us, as opposed to coming off as a subjective stance that the outsider can only admire, or not, but never really feel part of. I understood that contemporary art, despite all of its issues and paradoxes, is a universal human language that transcends cultural and social divisions, and is capable of becoming a meaningful encounter for every human being.

Obviously the art centre also fulfils an educational function and recently Izolyatsia also started a residency project for artists. How does Donetsk react to the proximity of international contemporary artists?

In a very reactive way, which is the biggest victory in an environment where indifference and suspicion are the default mechanisms in dealing with novelty and what seems to be outside the bounds of normality. This summer's residency has shown to us that an artists-in-residence program has a tremendous potential in terms of providing an injection to the city's cultural scene and thus aiding in its development. Our eight artists-in-residence created quite a bit of locomotion, they all had to in one way or another infiltrate a certain local social milieu in order to realise their photography projects on the theme "Partly Cloudy." This means that they met a lot of people with whom they struck bonds, but most importantly through communication, there was an exchange of ideas and energies. The residents became very popular with the young bohemian circles who have so little in Donetsk to nourish them, people who are passionate about photography, and young volunteers, who left their summer holiday plans to participate in this project.

In the glory times of USSR around one thousand people were working at Izolyatsia plant and many facilities existed around it such as a Cultural House, which had a wonderful theatre that collapsed under the snow of last winter and which will remain alive only in the light boxes of Andrei Loginov. Wouldn't it be great to have around one thousand artists working there one day, as an ode to Izolyatsia? Do you think this ambitious project might be possible?

I think it would be quite impossible to recreate the social and economic functions that Izolyatsia as a factory fulfilled in Soviet society quite simple because the context in which this physical space exists has completely changed. In fact, one may say that it was the new context that killed the factory and made it into a magnificent non-space. Soviet system was very much about mass production, everything was done on a large scale, numbers always mattered, and quality was often the price to pay for the hegemony of numbers. Your 'thousand artists' idea sounds conceptually similar to Vittorio Sgarbi's project for the Italian Pavilion during last Venice Biennale, where the curator asked a couple of hundred of what one assumes were his favourite public figures to invite their favourite artists to contribute a work. The show was entitled "Art is not the Cosa Nostra", which seems like an ironic commentary on the mafia-esque condition of the art world. And of course the "cosa nostra" stereotype is not so far from the stereotype of Eastern Ukraine as a brute industrial haven inhabited by the proletariat, so in a sense the Thousand Artists project would "proletarianise" artistic practice, and yes, that could be an interesting irony-laden ode to Soviet industrial production, but also today's consumer society and mass production in the contemporary art market.

Augmented Man by Dr. Ekaterina Rietz-Rakul and Steve Schepens, 2011

It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town.
F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (1925)

The passenger compartment enclosed us like a machine generating from our sexual act an homunculus of blood, semen and engine coolant.
J. G. Ballard, Crash (1973)

When J. G. Ballard was invited in 1970 by the New Arts Laboratory in London to ‘do anything there’, the writer exhibited three selected unaltered crashed cars. This ‘psychological experiment disguised as an art show’, so Ballard, was the prelude to the collection of condensed novels *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which in a chapter entitled *Crash!* introduced themes later explored in his novel *Crash*, first published in 1973.

The exhibition generated agitated reactions from visitors, who were interviewed by a topless woman and could see themselves on a closed circuit television broadcast, walking around the scrap metal. This ‘autogeddon’, a display of an accident as it is, made people furious and aggressive. The exhibited cars were attacked, taken apart and smeared with paint, and the half-naked interviewer nearly raped – so the myth around this exhibition tells. Offended visitors of the exhibition did not simply freeze because of this obvious display of the accident, they reacted in aggressive despair. They were confronted and experienced their own communication failure on screen as a television show.

Being more than satisfied with the results, Ballard proceeded with his studies of a contemporary personality, a fragile human being in the age marked by rapid technological development and decay of inter-human communication. In the *Crash*, loneliness and perplexity of a human is underlined by the solitude of the landscape. Ballard’s story unfolds along desolate motorways, depersonalised streams of traffic, parking houses, the airport. Desperately seeking for a possibility to reconnect to other humans and heal anxieties caused by machines, protagonists of *Crash* seek the rescue in their sexuality. The latter manifests itself through transgressive merge of, or, rather, craving for a merge of technology and flesh. Such a merge, seen as re-birth by the protagonists, happens during and as a result of traffic accidents and provoked car crashes. Probably, it is the most morbid illustration of creative potential of chaotic dynamic systems, so eagerly acknowledged by postmodernist philosophy. Accidents are the leitmotif of the *Crash*; they are photographed, filmed, watched, planned, and wanted. Not their destructive, but their creative force is brought to light. Indeed, ‘the accident reveals something important we would not otherwise know how to perceive’¹.

The re-birth and reinvention of novel’s protagonist, Ballard, is facilitated by other personages – Vaughan and his car. At high speed, Vaughan steers towards the concept of an altered man and

¹ S. Lotringer, P. Virilio, *The Accident of Art*, New York, 2005

during this voyage *au bout de la nuit* it becomes more and more obvious that the network of human relationships failed, both social and sexual. The personages are embarking this new era as structuralist beings: by deconstruction and rearrangement of their bodies, in this case connecting it to the body of the car. By breaking old boundaries and barriers between flesh and the machine through the action of the crash new nature of networks appear. 'These unions of torn genitalia and sections of car body and instrument panel formed a series of disturbing modules, units in a new currency of pain and desire¹ ... hard chrome and vinyl, brought to life by ... semen'² and vice versa.

After all, a connection of organic and non-organic material, of a human being and a machine, might be less impossible than it appears at a first sight.

N. Berdiaev, Russian religious philosopher, noticed already in 1933 that in the age marked by a deep lack of faith, failure of both religious and humanistic ideals the only strong belief of humanity is that into the power and inexhaustible potential of technology. 'Technology is the last love of a human being and he is prepared to change his image under the influence of the subject of his love'³.

Thinkers such as Lafitte in his *Reflexions sur la science des machines* (1932) claim, that machines cannot be seen as simple non-organic bodies. Technology is a new reality, new cosmos, created through and by a human being. It is an evidence of both incredible strength and servile weakness of man. So if a human is an organism, then a machine is a system, an organisation. The first one grows, develops, gives birth and has an immanent purpose; the second one consists of separate parts and has no inherent purpose whatsoever. The sense of live, the driving force is given to a machine by human demiurges.

On the other hand, some hundred years before, materialists and libertine ideologists, such as Marquise de Sade and Julien Offroy de La Mettrie (*L'homme machine*, 1747) claimed human bodies to be nothing more than machines, free of any transcendent component, such as soul and, subsequently moral reproaches. For them, humans were not organisms, but organisations. They consist of spear parts, which well arranged and co-ordinated, function as instruments of pleasure, and this is their only purpose. In this case, it does not play any role, if the part connecting to each other for pleasure are organic or not. Moreover, in the *Crash*, these new organisations become inseparable, as 'detached from his automobile, particularly his own emblem-filled highway cruiser' the protagonists 'ceased to hold any interest'⁴ for each other.

De Sade and later Ballard put these machines into the centre of literary narration. It raises a certain conflict: can a soulless and inanimate object be a protagonist? Well, it obviously is. In such narrations human beings recreate themselves as organisations, not organisms, and breathe new sense of life into these systems. They use their utmost demiurgian power to reduce themselves to powerless slavish systems. Relationships between such organisations, should only take place on the level of bodily functions. As a result, we have a narration which is almost free of sentimental descriptions and moral

¹ J.G. Ballard, *Crash*, London 1995, p. 109

² *Ibid.*, p. 97

³ N. Berdiaev, *Čelovek i mašina*, in: *Put'*, №38, 1933, p. 5. Here in translation of the authors.

⁴ J.G. Ballard, *Crash*, London 1995, p. 94

conflicts; a narration which in its aesthetics and style tends towards a user's manual. Ballard depicts car collisions and injuries left afterwards in rather dry clinical manner. Death and suffering are not seen as malicious in the novel, they receive no negative emotional valuation. Reminiscences of tragic events are precious and life-giving. So feels Ballard, during his sexual encounter with Helen, whose husband he has unwillingly killed in the accident. Penetrating Helen's vulva in a swollen framework of the car, where her spouse found his death, Ballard revives him. Own death is a culmination and ultimate happiness, at least for the mastermind of the group, Vaughan. The tank, as Ballard calls Vaughan's black automobile, a driving tomb, in which he constantly rehearses his own death. The pompous monument of stylized instrument panels and ornaments of semen, tasteless and showy, it reminds of a tomb of Trimalchio. He was a principal character in *Satyricon*, a novel by Petronius Arbiter (1st century BC), who organised an orgy where his own funeral was acted out. Trimalchio was also the original title of Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*; and just as Gatsby, Vaughan is Trimalchio, an aesthetic and moral provocateur and a trailblazer.

It would be naive to believe in the existence of purely materialistic social solutions. If indeed, for De Sade or Ballard, the notions of moral conflicts would not exist and the price of life would tend to zero – their narrations would collapse. The whole inspiration of the acts described lies in breaking the boundaries set by common sense, moral habits and Rousseau's social agreement. De Sade's heroes fully realise that torturing the innocent is what brings them to the highest peaks of pleasure. Ballard's heroes ignore the fact, that their victims, famous or unknown, are unwilling to join their feast of unification, to which they prescribe a meaning more deep and sacred, then just receiving physical pleasure.

The question of coexistence of humanity and machines has bothered intellectual and creative minds since forever. It may be seen either as a liberation of man and improvement of his life or as a triumph of the Beast and the beginning of the end for humanity. This way or the other, the merge of humans and machines is progressing, the borders are being crossed and the results of these developments in the brave new world are unforeseeable.

Augmented Man's Studio by Dr. Ekaterina Rietz-Rakul and Steve Schepens. 2011

In this essay we were asked to dwell upon two questions: how is it special to have a studio in Berlin and how it is different to create in the digital age.

I

*Mijn thuis is waar mijn Stella staat
(My home is, where my Stella is; Belgian proverb)*

The rough answer to the first question would be that it doesn't matter if one works from a studio situated in Berlin or anywhere else in the world. What is a possible reason to have a studio in Berlin is the combination of eventful art life, comfortable relaxed lifestyle and abundance of cheap spaces. This keeps on attracting both young and established artists to Berlin. Among the famous Wahlberliners (Berliners-by-choice) there are Jonathan Monk, Monica Bonvicini, Candice Brietz, Olafur Eliasson and many others. Somehow, no statistic agency has managed to name an accurate number of artists living in Berlin, but the generally estimated figure is about six-seven thousands, a quarter of those comes from abroad. Each year contemporary art galleries in Berlin offer quite a programme, showing about 5 000 artists in 3 000 exhibitions on more than 45 000 sq km of common area. Thus, in a certain way, a studio is a facilitator. Clearly, even if referred to as obsolete, the notion of a studio plays an important role in the artist's life: either as a blunt status symbol or the miniature model of the world or the only refuge from the latter. The artists' approaches towards studios and production processes vary: there are entrepreneurs with a large staff, lonely cowboys in small rooms or those, who fuse studio and living space.

Recently we came across a photo of Georg Baselitz in his studio, turned upside down for the promotion campaign of Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in reference to Baselitz' artistic practice of putting the motive or protagonist of his work on its head. On the promotion photo for the FAZ, the artist sits in a chair, which seems to stand on the ceiling, as if taking a contemplating break from the action of painting. The paintings, however, are showing their motives in the traditional way – feet down.

This picture immediately triggered several more or less famous images and art historical references. First of all, the early photographs from 1916 -1919 of Marcel Duchamp's New York studio and apartment by Henri-Pierre Roché: several 'ready-made' objects, including the famous Fountain from 1917, were floating in the air and a coat rack was nailed to the floor. Marcel Duchamp was sitting amidst, transparent like a ghost.

There was also *The Box*, a sculpture by Paul McCarthy from the Nineties, which presented his studio and its interior put on its side in what looks like a large wooden art transport crate.

Even Martin Kippenberger's Spiderman Studio from 1996 crossed our mind. Well, technically, this one was not turned upside down – though it could have been, as the problems of gravity obviously have never bothered the superhero. The piece was exhibited in a gallery in Nice; the space was used as a studio by Henry Matisse in 1930. Kippenberger found a witty way to ask: how superheroic are they really, the half-gods of art?

Our questions are, though: what happens when the studio is flipped on its side or upside down, or when the studio becomes obsolete, as Daniel Buren stated in his essay 'The Function of the studio' from 1971? What happens after the post-studio practice of John Baldessari? What happens if a studio is not bigger than a microchip processor of a laptop? Well, probably nothing.

There are, there have been and will always be artists with different needs and ways. On one hand, there is, Olafur Eliasson, who has a whole plant in Berlin, where he works with his many employees [Well, rather: had a whole plant, as the crisis has put an end to mass production in the fine arts]. On the other, there is Matt Mullican, American artist living in Berlin, who has his studio in New York. Here is what he told us in the interview we have conducted for our book *Contemporary Art Berlin*¹: "Oddly, my studio is still in New York, I have three people working there. We just moved the studio from the Wall Street area to Chinatown / Lower East Side area. My staff is very happy with the new space but I have yet to visit it. [ES: So the studio is living an independent life?] Yes, and people don't understand when I tell them I live in Berlin and my studio is in New York, they think I need to commute every week. But I have never hung out in my studio; my true studio is in my notebook. I was just in Münster and recently in Munich working on this big show at the Haus Der Kunst and am learning about the building, that's now my studio. I was in the class of Baldessari in 1971 called post studio art, that's my psyche."

II

*"I am studying an electronically controlled labyrinth which
will be used for psychological tests and brainwashing"*
Manzoni

As for the second question, the arrival of digital age did not change the artistic world as drastically, as, for instance, the beaten example of the invention of photography. Clearly, now, when computers and internet become omnipotent and omnipresent it does cause certain inevitable changes in working and living routine. The field of arts is no exception: digital literature and hypernovels, net and software art, digital installations, all this new arty virtual reality has come to light and keeps on developing. It is possible, that a new generation of artists will emerge from today's children - digital natives - and open art's new horizons. However at the present moment, it does not seem to matter if an artist is using paint, marble, concrete, light bulbs or digital media. Despite of dozens of books published on the new and fancy subject of digi-art, we do believe that, it did not crucially change the flow of history or deeply change the nature of an art work. Not yet.

Then again, the digital age did change the working manner of the art world quite a bit. Contemporary nomadic artist with a tablet computer, can be at home in all the art scenes of the world, without choosing to pin down his studio anywhere specific. It became so easy to use all media and produce simultaneously in different cities. The portfolios and ideas are shared within seconds, works are sold and money is transferred within minutes for instance on the newly founded VIP Virtual Art Fair. Nonetheless, the opening VIP dinner was served in the old fashioned way: real food in the real world.

¹ Art-Guide German and English „Berlin. Contemporary Art: sehen/kaufen/machen“, Grebennikov Verlag, Berlin 2010, ISBN-10: 3941784072, ISBN-13: 978-3941784079

III

Manifesto for Augmented Man's studio
Or the future of the future artist

The Artist's Studio (L'Atelier du peintre): *A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life*, is a painting by Courbet from 1855 and shows us the artist turned away from a nude model who's looking over his shoulder – a metaphor for academic art practice. Courbet, joyful but concentrated, is painting his canvas in an innovative way; a large crowd of people, fellow artists and writers, even admirers, are engaged either in some sort of important action or just hanging around, a cat is playing in the foreplan and a child is following the artist's every move; and, last but not least, the writer and art critic Baudelaire is working in the right corner on what could be his *The Painter of Modern Life*.

Putting this painting upside down, as if reflected in the water, and by this overthrow the myth of the studio, has so many reasons, so many intercultural explanations that one gets to wonder, why hasn't this fully legitimate way of working been used more often. There seems to be no better way to explain a habitual phenomenon than putting it in a new perspective.

Here are two of many reasons why it is important for the augmented artist.

Reason One: The Mirror

According to Jaques Lacan mirror-stage is the key stage for forming of an ego of a human being. Recognising itself in a mirror, a baby at last perceives its body as a whole and greets it with jubilation, after a short phase of rivalry and aggression. On the other hand, the mirror-stage is also the time, when a child realises the existence of the *other*. After years of dwelling over this problem, Lacan had come to a conclusion, that the mirror-stage was far more than just a moment in the development of a child; it illustrated the conflict nature of a dual relationship. Watching the studio behind the looking-glass, will let the artist see that familiar space as well as himself in it, in a new way, thus facilitation new and unexpected approaches.

Reason Two: Intertextuality

The manifesto's idea obviously does not exist in a cultural desert. Paul McCarthy , Georg Baselitz, Marcel Duchamp and last but not least, Piero Manzoni with his *Socle du Monde, an Homage to Galileo*, have experimented with the habits and expectations imposed on us by Earth gravity. However, no artist, or curator has exploited this idea to the full extent. As we know, the truth about a disorienting situation is in the gap between what the eye perceives and what the brain concludes. It will be up to the Augmented Artist to discover it.

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Besides his work as a visual artist, ***Steve Schepens*** also writes for different art magazines and published Contemporary Art Guide Berlin in co-authorship with Dr. Ekaterina Rietz-Rakul at Grebennikov Verlag in October 2010. He was also curator of Berlinaire in Ghent and Donetsk goes Contemporary in the Ukraine, and is the founder of ESC art centre in Lviv and the Director of the Belgian Cultural House in Lviv.

Previous exhibitions include: BE-PART (BE), De Bond (BE), SMAK Museum (BE), Netwerk (BE); MARTa Museum (DE); Artnews (DE); The Residence Gallery (UK); brot.und spiele gallery (DE), De Brakke Grond (NL), Baronian_Francey Galerie (BE)

Future exhibitions include: a permanent sculpture for the city of Mechelen (BE), CC Strombeek (BE), Casino de Luxembourg (LUX), Marianne Friis Gallery (CPH), RU Residence (NYC), HEART Museum (DK),

Steve Schepens is represented by Marianne Friis Gallery, Copenhagen and Galerie Van De Weghe, Antwerp and is present in private collections such as EKARD Collection and museum collections such as HEART and MUHKA.

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