

The Story of M.B. as told by Jef Geys

The exhibition 'The Story of M.B. as told by Jef Geys' is an invitation to get acquainted with and to immerse ourselves in two interrelated graphic works that were created almost fifty years ago in the workshop of the Frans Masereel Centre and are now being reunited for the first time.

Each work received a post-factum caption from its respective creator. Or better: both artists wrote a short note on Marcel Broodthaers' work. In passing, Jef Geys reveals that he was not only responsible for the production of Broodthaers' work, but also created a work himself on the proofs that is directly related to one of his reference works from the early 1970s.

The presentation contextualises and activates both the unique genesis and the artistic intentions of both works by allowing them, together with some period documents, to enter into dialogue with an intergenerational group of contemporary artists, many of whom created new works. This international group exhibition thus not only reflects on the unstable nature of meanings or hybrid forms of authorship, but also provides a framework for understanding an increasingly important phenomenon, namely the manufacturability of stories and the polyphony of knowledge, and its impact on both our daily and global processes.

“Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects – but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change. To ‘be modern’ means to modernize – compulsively, obsessively; not so much just ‘to be’, let alone to keep its identity intact, but forever ‘becoming’, avoiding completion, staying underdefined.

– Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Modernity (2000)

“It seems that one not only has to defend facts, but maybe fiction has to be defended equally rigorously. It is a fact that telling fictional stories does not necessarily equal lying.”

– Hito Steyerl, interview met Alex Greenberger, ARTnews (2020)

From 1972 to 1976, the late Jef Geys was artistic coordinator of the autonomous non-profit organisation The Friends of the Frans Masereel Centre. In this capacity he invited several artists in 1972 to make a lithographic print that would be presented together in a folder. "I proposed to publish a 'folder' that would contain 4 prints. [The fourth print had to be a Marcel Broodthaers, I thought. According to the official correspondence of the vzw, the folder eventually contained work by six artists: Jan Cobbaert, Jan Vaerten, Marcel Broodthaers, Patrick Conrad, Freddy Van Dyck and Toon Tersas.

In 2020, the Frans Masereel Centre was able to get hold of a flawless copy of the relevant work by Marcel Broodthaers, as well as the work that Jef Geys - as the producer of the work of M.B. - created at the same time on the back of the blue proofs of the work of Broodthaers. Both works are the occasion for and the opening part of the group exhibition 'The story of M.B. as told by Jef Geys', which can be seen as a prelude to the jubilee year 2022, when the Frans Masereel Centre celebrates its 50th anniversary.

Although the two works seem to have little in common, both artists make a statement about the changing nature of meanings, conventions and the prevailing order - and thus share the same concern. After all, where the work of Marcel Broodthaers clearly refers to his work *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. *Image* (1969), in which he makes the original text disappear, elevates it to an image - and thus explicitly erodes the meaning - Jef Geys writes in a letter about the similarly-named, more extensive installation *Political Aspect of an Emotion* (1972): "The aim of this project is to elicit from all those involved in it, either for themselves or publicly, a statement about the meaning of a certain visual material that applies to them and to the present, in the knowledge that this meaning - individually and collectively - changes over time.

A similar approach characterises the collages that Lili Dujourie made at the end of the 1970s, entitled *Roman*. Despite the promising title, there is no ready-made story or plot to be discovered in the cuttings that the artist carefully selected and assembled into a composition. In contrast to her other works on paper from the 1970s, however, for *Roman* she did not limit herself to abstract images or colours: by consciously using recognisable images ("fragments of erotic pictures from cheap magazines") she focuses our attention on the way we look at and the expectations we place on women and men.

We also consciously bring the new work that Nora Turato created in our workshop earlier this year into dialogue with the two works that form the basis of this research exhibition. Fragments of text from all sorts of sources are strung together, but fail to transcend the limited tenability of their spectacle content. The origin of the beauty industry, or more broadly the consumer and attention society, shines through, which gives an extra dimension to the joint presentation with the early work of Lili Dujourie.

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A short text posted by Jef Geys on his blog in 2016 marks the turning point in this exhibition. Geys' online note set us on the road to bringing the two works together again for the first time and to look for the story behind their creation.

The final version of Broodthaers' work, *Lettre Ouverte* (1972), was eventually printed on 297 copies. There are also three copies of a first, slightly larger version, in which the text has not yet been crossed out. In the exhibition, we combine this first version with the corresponding proof, which only recently surfaced. It is this, and other proofs, that Jef Geys used to print his edition, *Politique aspect van een emotie* (1972).

In March 1973 Broodthaers' final work is officially presented and offered for sale. Shortly afterwards the board of directors of the non-profit organisation The Friends of the Frans Masereel Centre, together with the artist, published an accompanying letter, in which Broodthaers used both his father's (Charles Emile Broodthaers) and mother's (Bertha Annecour) surnames. Geys also repeatedly used other identities in his work - such as the youthful fellow villager Gijs Van Doorn, with whom he exhibited together and whose name he used as a kind of admin of the aforementioned blog post. The title of Broodthaers' accompanying letter (*La Lettre Volée / De Gestolen Brief* (1973)) not only implies

a reference to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, but it also resonates nicely with the point of Geys' blog post and their mutual views on identity, authorship and the genius of the individual artist.

Another primary source can be found in one of Jef Geys's archive books, namely the contract between the vzw De Vrienden van het Frans Masereel Centrum and Broodthaers, on which Geys himself noted down an overview of the costs involved in the production.

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The fanning out, partly handed down story that was written this way by both artists and the management board of the autonomous non-profit organisation, is the reason for us to zoom in on the social engineering of stories, the fictional character of a narrative (and how this is addressed in the visual practice of contemporary artists) and by extension the space that art offers to generate alternative forms of knowledge, in the second part of the exhibition.

Someone who often tears down the fourth wall and shows his own chalk outlines, but just as often assigns new meanings to existing images and makes us as viewers complicit in what we see, is the German filmmaker Harun Farocki. Although *Wie man sieht* (As you see) (1986) is a lesser-known work, it is exemplary of Farocki's associative montage of images and critical view of positions of power. "My film is made up of many details and creates a lot of image-image and word-image and word-word relationships among them. For some time, Farocki even toyed with the idea of allowing the viewers to edit the footage themselves.

The British-American-Belgian artist and author Melissa Gordon also investigates prevailing views and positions of power within her feminist-inspired practice. For several years now, she has been working on a special, steadily growing series of paintings, *Female Readymades*, in which she takes a close look at modern art history and draws attention to undervalued - often female - creators and their greatly underestimated role within what is considered the canon today. Each canvas is a place where multiple facts, names, anecdotes, experiences, objects and gestures become visible and together generate new (or old) knowledge. Each title reads like a manual for one's own interpretation as our eyes scan the surface and Gordon's painterly approach. The grid with which each work begins serves as a base from which to build, take away, try something new, make connections and let the imagination work.

The brand-new sculpture *Out of Touch / Angry Letter Box* (2021) is characteristic of Sven 't Jolle's sculptural practice: (art) historical references, social developments, puns, anecdotes, hard economic facts, as well as imaginary or real forms, motifs and characters are first interwoven, repeated, commented on and reworked in the intimacy of a growing series of sketchbook drawings - to make the transition, many years later and selectively, to a three-dimensional object.

A few years ago, the artist realised a first series of letterboxes (*Out of Touch / Angry Letterboxes* (2019)), in which he linked Australian folk art - in particular the tradition of giving shape to a letterbox in the countryside itself - with the protest of the *gilets jaunes* in France, which also arose outside the major cities. The physical distance, for which sending a letter is a vanishing metaphor, is linked to the (figurative) gap between citizens and politics, which 't Jolle further elaborated in an accompanying newspaper full of cuttings, quotes, documentary photos and his own work.

The theme of the class struggle is also present in this new letterbox - with the sickle, the plunge and the open mouths. 't Jolle also relates the sculpture to the contemporary concept of neo-Feudalism and thus relates the work to the here and now, where a few big tech companies are installing new forms of precarity, monopoly and changing power relations at state level. That in the aftermath of the Black Plague farmers successfully revolted against their poor working conditions offers - with the global Covid-19 pandemic still fresh in our minds - a surprising, alternative perspective on this.

Although artists often work together, for example in a sustainable way as a duo or collective, or once only within a specific context, it is less common for artists with an established international practice to develop a long-term common practice, and certainly not if this forms an entirely separate chapter, with little or no connection to the individual work that they continue to create consistently at the same time. Yet that is what is going on with the recent collages by Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski brought together here. Since 2017, they have been creating a new series of works on paper together, taking inspiration from poems by important poets. The resulting works are made up of layers of paint, ink, clippings and stamps. Fragile work that prefers poetry to sloganary statements and needs to be experienced rather than looked at. Two artists appear in all their vulnerability, with their ups and downs, who together tap into a new creativity and sensitivity.

The exhibition concludes with Sara Magenheimer's *Art and Theft* (2017), an insidiously light video that, in the seven minutes and twenty-two seconds it takes - or would take - to rob a house, unfolds a reflection on the limits of narrativity and the illusion of handed-down wisdom. Images of medieval art, popular cinema and "live" news reports give us a sobering insight into the constructed nature of any possible narrative tradition.

- It looks like this artist is a woman.
- How can you tell?
- Women own the void.

– **Sara Magenheimer, Art and Theft (2017)**

Curator: Stijn Maes
Assistant Curator: Frédéric Van de Velde
Communication: Ellen Asaert
Set up: Stefan Willekens
Reception: Charlotte Valgaeren
Bookshop: Anna Laganovska

With thanks to all participating artists, as well as Frank Hendrickx, Nina Geys, Kai Ohara, Hilde Vanfleteren, Isabella Ritter, Maite Vanhellemont, Elsa de Seynes, Antje Ehmman, Aleksandra Sciegienna, Zach Vanes, Philip Van den Bossche, Musea Brugge and the staff of the Frans Masereel Centrum.

Recommendations

Marcel Broodthaers: Industriële gedichten, open brieven

WIELS, Brussel (BE)

10.09.2021 – 09.01.2022

Melissa Gordon: Liquid Gestures

Towner, Eastbourne (UK)

16.10.2021 – 30.01.2022

Nora Turato

Secession, Wenen (AU)

20.11.2021 – 23.01.2022

Politiek aspect van een gestolen brief (2021)

Publisher: Frans Masereel Centrum

Paweł Althamer, Artur Żmijewski: The Ultimate Song (2020)

ISBN: 978-83-65851-40-6

Melissa Gordon: The Embarrassment of SUCKCESS #1-4 (2019)

Publisher: Kunstinstituut Melly

Jef Geys: Archief 5 (2019)

Jef Geys: Archief 4 (2017)

Jef Geys: Archief 3 (2016)

Jef Geys: Archief 1+2 (2015)

Publisher: Frans Masereel Centrum

Jef Geys: Al de zwart-wit foto's tot 1998 (1998)

ISBN: 9789492707000

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