

An Economy of Truth
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Everything you always wanted to know about belgian art, but were afraid to ask a Belgian
by Wim Peeters

Through a number of criminal and political events at the end of the 20th century, Belgium rapidly achieved international cult status. Today the country finds itself in a permanent state of exception that manifests itself as a general — not just political — conspiracy, one that bears an internal resemblance to Pandora's box: once opened, it reveals only more lids and boxes. The pragmatism of Belgium's undisciplined society — many roads lead to Rome — make it attractive as the embryo of a new casuist utopia. To illustrate: in 2001 Carsten Höller based his Boudewijn Experiment on the late King Boudewijn's 24-hour abdication from the throne, necessary to maneuver a contentious abortion law through parliament. Beyond its inventive bicomunal identity, however, from the 1960s onward Belgium's political and criminal past has increasingly come to involve more international dimensions (Gladio, CIA, NATO), necessitating a more relational economy of truth to be developed both in art and beyond.

In Belgium, in the meantime, the wind is blowing in several directions at once. The country's simultaneously central and peripheral geographic location allows for the thinking and unthinking of radically different economies for art. A critical alliance with the international mainstream defines the most prevalent politics of intervention and production within those margins. On the basis of such a flexible framework, we will have to take a chance at drafting a negotiation of meanings that can deal in a more heterogeneous and differentiated way with the artistic production of the past decade.

In the 1990s, while Felix Gonzalez-Torres was being promoted as a key figure in international art, in Belgium a reevaluation of the heretofore unnoticed Guy Mees (1935 – 2003) was able to uncover attitudes that weren't exactly in line with the official, internationally-promoted account of Belgian art. If sculpture used to be the thing you fell over when looking at a painting, then Guy Mees' work moved into the space both of those media left behind in the 1960s. Mees' Lost Spaces exist as lace-covered free-standing volumes with ultraviolet light and strips of colored paper pinned to the wall and cut in the shape of limbs, skirts, dresses, and abstract forms. In a circumscribed way Mees' body of work defined a nondescript but seductive moment that was later picked up at the end of the '90s in the delicate yet playful work of Gert Robijns and Reinaart Vanhoe. In 1968 Mees himself had already conceived a dance floor made of aluminum and ultraviolet lights as a precursor to the new subject/object economies.

A persistent focus on social transformation during that same period distinguished the work of Jef Geys (b. 1935), which debuted at the 1958 Brussels World Exhibition in a climate that synthesized the abrupt uprooting of rural society with a fresh (albeit deceptive) post-war optimism. Geys began to seek out a performativity that quickly came up against the guile of

the institutional art world's representational culture. He performed for a time as *soigneur* for a cyclist and opened the cabaret *Negresco*, where he organized a varying program that featured at various times a dancer, an acrobat, and the artists James Lee Byars and Bernd Lohaus. More recently, at *Documenta 11* he staged a 36-hour-long projection of black and white photographs (*Day and Night and Day and...*, 2002) that, while functioning as an exhibition *raisonné*, also situated his artistic activity on the same plane as all the other mundane activities a day or a night might contain.

Whereas in the 1950s the boundaries between utopia and entertainment had already begun to blur, at the end of the 1990s a cross between *Wallpaper* magazine and the United Nations characterized the diffuse balance between tactics and ambitions exercised by most contemporary art and exhibition practices. Artists in the 1990s began to bore new ways into critical thinking, either within the margins set by that compromise or, like Geys, beyond its parameters. Ives Maes (b. 1976), for instance, probed the derailment of contemporary hyperethics with his project for a recyclable refugee camp built to the strict specifications of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. His latrines, wells, shelters, and coffins, fabricated in recyclable natural resin, raise ethics to a manic state. Maes' prosthetic city is morphologically based on works by Michelangelo Pistoletto and Mario Merz, allowing the aesthetic surplus of his biodegradable structure to foster the psychological well-being of its inhabitants. The *Recyclable Refugee Camp* tackles the ethical imperative that encourages art to intervene in the world, localizing the epicenter of a new utopia inside the boundaries of the art world itself.

Whereas Ives Maes crosses his recycling of recent art history with strategies of transformation and perversion, for Ana Torfs (b. 1963) history becomes a vehicle to look into the complexities of our subjective relationship with the present. The starting points of the slide installation "*Du Mentir-faux*" are the trial documents of Joan of Arc. A long series of black and white portraits of a young woman are projected in a dark space and regularly interrupted by text frames displaying the tautological questions of the inquisitors. Each click of the projector seems like another page turning, each one further sealing the fate of Joan of Arc. "*Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*" is a film about the last years in the life of the already deaf Ludwig van Beethoven. In it, Torfs goes back over notes that the deaf composer's friends and family wrote to carry on their everyday conversation with the composer. We have no knowledge of Beethoven's replies, for he could still speak and did not need to write anything back. Consequently in the film Beethoven is the absent actor on the stage whose role we can only assemble with difficulty from the text fragments addressed to him. Torfs is fascinated by individuals and the positions they occupy in a collective environment. She translates this fascination into the genre of portraiture, making a detour through reconstruction based on a reading of history's imprints — a reading that can never be true. Aside from these historical dimensions, Torfs' work is also deeply rooted in today's tragic construction of identities.

Rather than mirroring or representing reality, Gert Robijns' (b. 1972) work is conceived as an extension of it. Robijns operates with a minimum of signals — sounds, a change in temperature, a gust of wind, or a flickering lightbulb — to engage a snippet of our peripheral attention. Despite their minimal enunciative potential, Robijns transposes these signals into

extensive installations. In 1997 he laid out an outdoor landscape made up of polystyrene beads hemmed in by the boundaries of an existing tennis court and covered with a transparent plastic roof. On the ground between the thick layers of beads, ventilators blew, occasionally exposing the terrain below and placing viewers in another time where, between the play of natural and artificial wind, any deceleration became a performance in slow motion. Robijns scatters our perceptions by adding sounds or images to a space, much like pixels fill the digital realm. In this enhanced space, a network of triggers unfolds as an index of space, time, and subjectivity.

Another work, *Curtain*, is a video of a curtain projected onto a similar curtain in a 1:1 ratio. The video creates the illusion of wind occasionally rustling the fabric, as if from an open window, while an audio loop of incidental noises brought in by the imaginary wind triggers recollected experience. Recently Robijns took on a number of works from the Antwerp Museum of Contemporary Art (MUHKA) in a comparable manner, reproducing works of the collection life-size in grayscale. A billiard table, a bingo machine, and a number of Robijns' photographs and videos stand out on carbon copies of a painting by Bernard Frieze, a triptych by Ettore Spaletti, and a table by Hermann Pitz. Like *Muzak*, where a number of frequencies are eliminated from sound to divert or direct our emotions, Robijns cuts the over- and under-tones from the works without ever really making them absent. The museum is put on standby, the added ideological echoes of its space tuned down in order to focus on a potentially new reification of signifiers.

Narcisse Tordoir (b. 1953) conducts similar research centered on the domain of painting. Tordoir considers painting a specific *modus operandi* that extends not only over different media, but also into domains as diverse as news reporting, fashion design, video clips, and digital photography. Based on this extended notion of painting, in 1999 Tordoir and Luc Tuymans joined efforts as curators for the exhibition project "Trouble Spot."

In 2001 Tordoir gave his own artistic investigation a new turn by radicalizing the authorial premises of his own oeuvre, embarking on a series of artistic collaborations and venturing into the vulnerable exchange of ideas and meanings. Tordoir started by opening up his own studio as a collaborative workstation with David Neirings, Koen de Decker, Carla Arocha, Bruna Hautman, and James Beckett, among others. He extended this practice in 2002, together with Alouine Bâ and Bréhima Koné, by setting up a series of workshops that led to a semi-permanent culture exchange workstation in Bamako, Mali, centered on the traditional Bogolan technique of textile painting. *Fight for 1000 Negatives*, realized in conjunction with Tordoir's African exchange, is a video documentary about the Seydou Keita Foundation. It attempts to bring the estate of the late Malinese photographer into a precarious balance with a Western photo economy, much as Tordoir endeavors to reconfigure his background in painting within the socio-ritual but equally utilitarian production of the Bogolan.

A thorough analysis of the actual production of recent years would require that criticism, much like Tordoir's broadened exchange with the Bogolan, take on and develop a framework that is more dynamic and differentiated than the model offered in the generalizing and consolidating criticism of Belgian art history. Criticism, but also exhibition practice, must become simultaneously more generic and more analytical to render visible the

complex cultural shifts experienced by Belgium, at the heart of Europe, while also expanding and questioning its contours and horizons. The above panorama is obviously very limited, but it can put us on a new track towards unraveling the artistic activity of a country that has been in the picture for, too often, all the wrong reasons and hopefully in the future will be for the right ones.

(Translated from Flemish by Rosemary McKisack)

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Exhibitions:

2002: "Viewmaster," NICC Antwerp; "Exile on Main Street," NICC Antwerp. 2001: "The Big Show," NICC Antwerp. 2000: "hobbypopmusuem," NICC Antwerp.