Le Sans Nom
September 26–October 24, 2026
Opening: September 25, 7pm
Etablissement d’en face
Place Jean Jacobs 1
1000 Brussels
www.etablissementdenface.com
Instagram

Decades before the advent of Google’s now ubiquitous Street View, the Sint-Lukasarchief started an ambitious survey of almost every street and square in Brussels. For this “Emergency Inventory,” commissioned in 1974, first published in 1979, and continued until the early 2000s, Jos Vandenbreeden, Alfons Hoppenbrouwers, and Jan Apers documented urban textures and buildings endangered by demolition: municipality by municipality, street by street, even-numbered side by odd-numbered side, façade by façade, they walked on foot, armed with a camera and notebooks, all over the city, covering an area of 160 square kilometers, and a road network of 1,628 kilometers.

The thousands of black-and-white photographs produced over the years reveal far more than the architectural heritage they were intended to record. Incidental details repeatedly divert attention from the façades—details the photographers were, then as now, scarcely aware of. Viewed today, the images emerge as remarkable documents of a city in gradual decline, where neglect and decay erased the original functions of its buildings.

Habitat of the displaced and discarded, from old household belongings to living residents: first-generation immigrants make their way to one of the many travel agencies, while the often seemingly drunk roam the streets or linger in bars, such as La Tour Eiffel, Le Paradis, or De Stoemeling, before eventually finding their way to Le sans nom. These images carry traces of the everyday lives of many of the city’s inhabitants, the collective struggle, and the parallel economies that unfolded against the silent backdrop of Brussels’ historic architecture.

Occupying all floors of Etablissement d’en face, the exhibition brings together approximately 130 photographs selected from the archive by artist Harald Thys.

In the words of Nikolaus Hirsch, artistic director of Kanal Architecture: “Harald Thys is probably the first person who looked at all 104,000 photos of the survey in one go. The Sint-Lukasarchief, founded in the late 1960s as part of the Sint-Lukas School in Brussels and now part of the collection of Kanal Architecture, was an archive engaged in resisting the ongoing modernization and speculation, as entire urban quarters were sacrificed to the project of making Brussels the capital of Europe. The photos selected for the exhibition at Etablissement d’en face show a twofold phenomenon: the intention to preserve the threatened urban texture and a society in suspense. The old is vanishing, and the new is not yet there.”

In the context of the exhibition at Etablissement d’en face, the archive serves as a starting point for reflection. Beyond raising broader questions of social class, marginalization, and exclusion, it constitutes an obsessive record of an existential condition. The exhibition offers an uncompromising portrait of a city in decline, revealing the fractures of urban life with striking clarity.

Coinciding with the exhibition, and as part of an ongoing project initiated in 2026 by The Guillaume Bijl Estate (Ulrike Lindmayr and Nadia Bijl) and Etablissement d’en face, one of Guillaume Bijl’s Sorry works will be presented in a small attic space. Recently deceased, Bijl started the series in the 1980s and continued to work on it as a parallel practice to his large-scale, more realistic, yet no less humorous installations throughout the years. The Sorry works are dissonant assemblages of found objects. At once banal, frivolous, and honest, they inhabit a gray zone between critique and complicity, never fully unraveling themselves.

The work exhibited in the attic depicts a small ceramic sculpture of an old woman staring at a cardboard box and is, in a sense, a continuation of the consternation experienced by the visitor after seeing 130 photographs of relics of an imploding city.

A collaboration between Etablissement d’en face and Kanal Architecture. Etablissement d’en face: Harald Thys, Nina Janssen, Stefanie Snoeck. Kanal Architecture: Francis Carpentier, Danny Casseau, François de Heyder, Sophie Gentens, Nikolaus Hirsch.

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