

Alias

Production by M Leuven, Curated by Valerie Verhack

In the time of artificial intelligence, fake news, and deepfake videos, today, more than ever, we are confronted on a broader social level with the need to distinguish reality from fiction in a critical way. But instead of strictly separating delusion and fact, some artists allow both to coexist at the same time through a fictional alias.

M Leuven presents 'Alias', a large research exhibition on a growing phenomenon in recent art history: fictional artists. The exhibition brings together some 80 artworks from national and international public and private collections in an unprecedented display. Piece by piece, the works illustrate the strategies contemporary artists use to conflate fiction and reality, and how they confound our perception of the truth.

The exhibition 'Alias', curated by [Valerie Verhack](#), takes a closer look at the growing genre of fictional artistry. 'Alias' probes such practices from the 1960s on in Belgium and beyond within the Western art world. Throughout five rooms of approximately 100 m² each, the exhibition points out different strategies in fictionality used by these artists, the context behind them that helps determine how fiction is used and why. 'Alias' is accompanied by a book of the same name, published by M Leuven, Fondation Willame and Walther Koenig Verlag and launched on May 2nd, 2024.

Participating artists

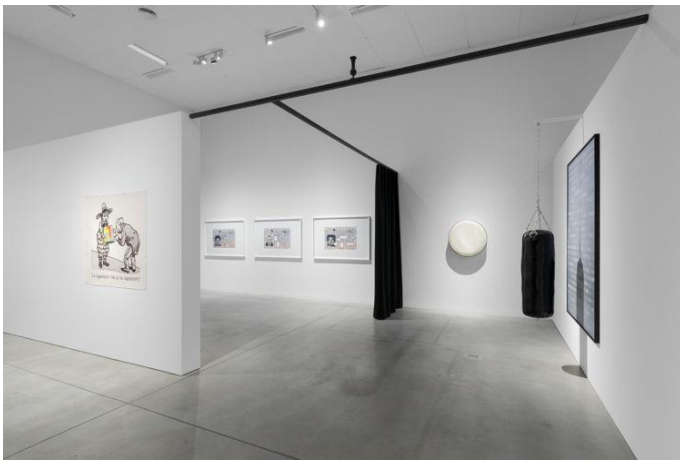
Eleanora Antinova, Jakup Auce, Mary Aurory, Bernadette Corporation, Vern Blosum, Deborah Bowmann, Roberta Breitmöre, The Bruce High Quality Foundation, Yoon-Ja Choi & Paul Devautour, Henry Codax, John Doe Company, John Dogg, Aston Ernest, Emily Feather, Claire Fontaine, Lucie Fontaine, Justine Frank, Irwin Green, Florence Hasard, Janez Janša Janez Janša Janez Janša, Jim Jilborn, Alfred Johansen, Leo Josefstein, Darko Maver, Brian O'Doherty, NV Panneel, Oksana Pasaiko, Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), readymades belong to everyone®, Charles Rosenthal, Herman Smit, Reena Spaulings, Santo Sterne, Ernest T., Philippe Thomas, Suha Traboulsi, Hubert Van Es, Storm van Helsing, Various Artists, Hennessy Youngman

The exhibition 'Alias'

In 'Alias', works of artists who operate under one or more alter egos are brought together. By adopting a different identity, artists can break free from gender or cultural issues, the rules of the art world, and the capitalist system that turns names into brands. Every fictional artist has a unique context that defines their work. This context plays a crucial role in determining the utilisation and rationale behind their fiction. What strategies lie behind fictional artists? Do they develop on the level of the artist themselves? Do they touch upon the art world or emerge as a reaction to society?



Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Photo: Useful Art Services.



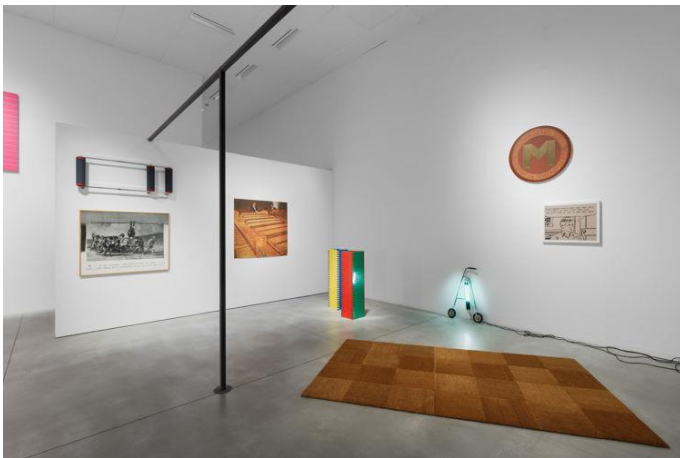
Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Photo: Useful Art Services.



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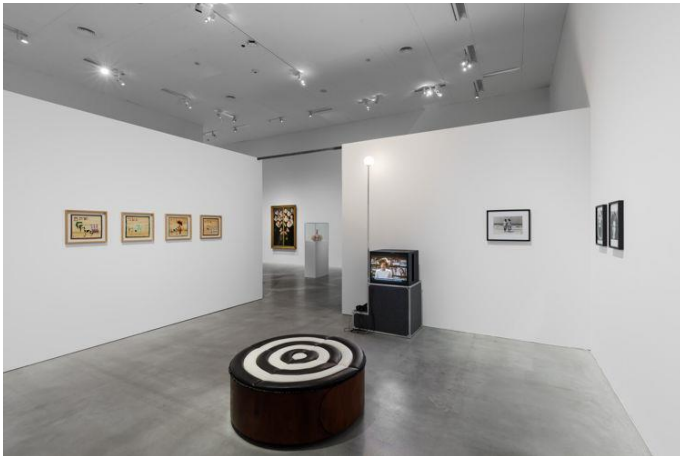
Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Photo: Useful Art Services.



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Scenography

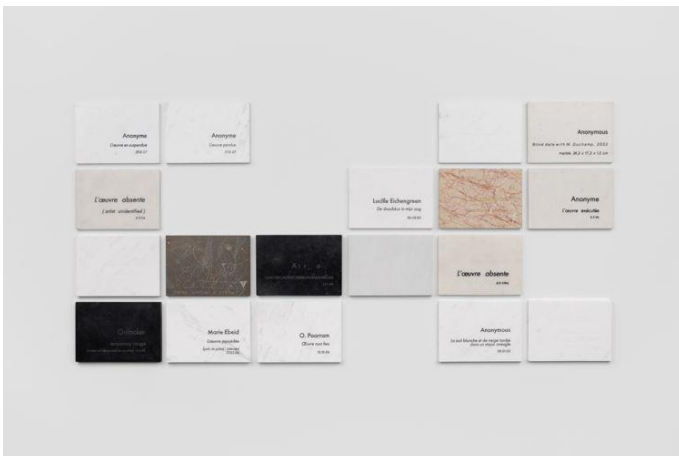
The scenography of 'Alias' is conceived by Deborah Bowmann, a name taken up by the French artists Amaury Daurel & Victor Delestre in 2014 as a cover for a multitasking practice of art and its display. For 'Alias', Bowmann accommodates the special request to design, from the perspective of a fictive entity, a museum exhibition of/about fictive artists. Being shown the (fiction of the) back-stage through curtains, flocked structures, flight cases, and furniture, one seems to become witness to more than what is allowed by the traditional museum-fiction. The environment invites the viewer to consider what it takes for fictions to exist.



Art Tool Paint Experiments, Dip and Drip in Display Box #4, John Doe Company, 1972. Courtesy of the artist and Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Ruben Diaz, Los Angeles.



Our comedies are nothing to be laughed at, Jakup Auce, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and CINNAMON Gallery, Rotterdam. Photo: Lotte Stekelenburg.



Tablettes d'identification d'un artiste, Jim Jilborn, 1994-2024. Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven. Produced with the support of M Leuven and Van Den Weghe. Photo: Useful Art Services.



John Not Johnny, John Dogg, 1987. Courtesy of Venus Over Manhattan, New York.



Sketchbook H. Smit, ...-2024. Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Useful Art Services.



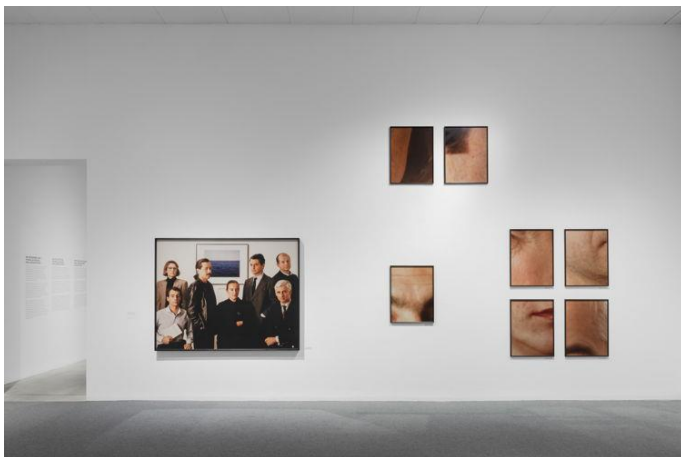
All About You (detail), Janez Janša Janez Janša Janez Janša, 2016. Courtesy of Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana. Photo: Janez Janša and Katra Petriček.



La signature! Où ça la signature?, Ernest T., 1990. Courtesy of Semiose, Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

Room 1: Imagining Names

Artists operating under a fictional alias embrace a blank canvas: a fresh start where everything remains open, including the choice of a name. With fictional artists, this is seldom arbitrary. A new name implies escaping from all forms of predestination, such as a historical identity or psychologically inherited traits. Likewise, choosing a common generic name (John Doe Company, John Dogg) or a political name (Janez Janša Janez Janša Janez Janša) can disrupt the conventional naming system. What is the value of a signature (Ernest T.) or a name stamp (Herman Smit) as a visual sign of authenticity when conceived or placed by fictional artists? In this room, works are shown by fictional artists whose names play an essential role in our experience or interpretation of their work.



Fictionnalisme: une pièce à conviction – Jean Brolly, Georges Bully, Herman Daled, Lidewij Edelkoort, Françoise Epstein, Dominique Païni et Michel Tournereau, Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris, 1985-86. Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven. Courtesy of the artist and Cnap – Centre national des arts plastiques (France). In the deposit of Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes. FNAC 35415. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Roberta's Construction Chart #2, Lynn Hershman Leeson/Roberta Breitmore, 1975. Courtesy of the artist and Wouters Gallery, Brussels.



Latent, Lucie Fontaine, 2023. Exhibition views *Alias*, M Leuven. Courtesy of Galerie Sabot, Cluj-Napoca. Photo: Useful Art Services.



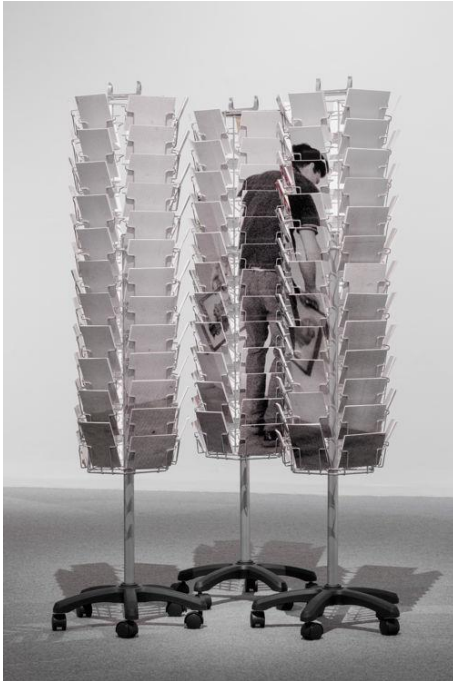
A portrait of Aston Ernest as a boy, Aston Ernest, 2023. ©Ryan Gander. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Dan McCabe and Disneyland Paris, Perth.



Headless Man, Claire Fontaine, 2016. Exhibition views *Alias*, M Leuven. Courtesy of Claire Fontaine, Palermo, EGEAC, Cultura em Lisboa, and Galerie Neu, Berlin. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Five Identities, Brian O'Doherty, 2002. Courtesy of Galerie Thomas Fischer, Berlin. Photo: Anthony Hobbs.



We only get to go round once, Santo Sterne, 2024. Exhibition views *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. ©Ryan Gander. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Useful Art Services.

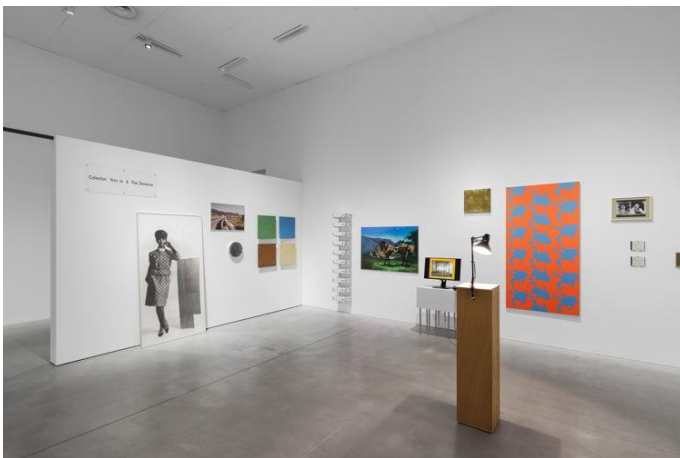
Room 2: Faces of Fiction

Much like the names of fictional artists, the personas they embrace are typically not arbitrary designations. How do you create (self) portraits of artists who essentially do not exist?

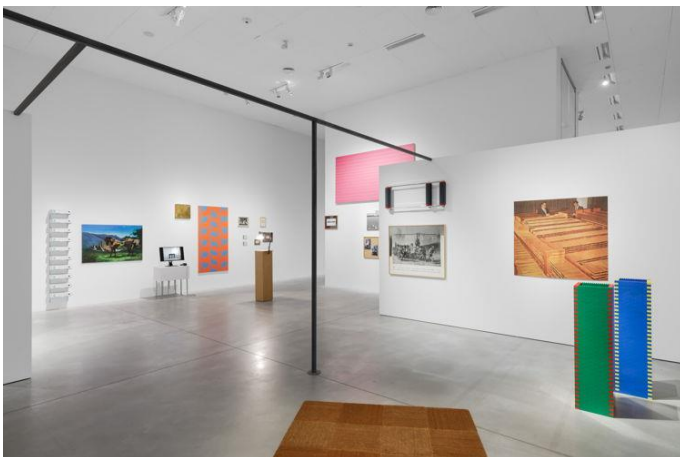
The (self) portrait is synonymous with awareness and is also intrinsically linked to identity: it breathes 'I exist/they exist'. Artists literally and metaphorically play out the complexity of what that self exactly entails through signifiers linked to gender, origin, or culture. A portrait can be a feminist critique of the restrictive societal image of what it means to be a woman (Roberta Breitmore). Or it can form a critique of 'production' within the capitalist system (Claire Fontaine). A group portrait can visualise within which domains of the art world you will profile yourself (Brian O'Doherty). Alternatively, it can serve as a means for the artist to disappear as an author in favour of the network of collectors surrounding him (Philippe Thomas). Just like in what we consider reality, there is no singular truth. In that sense, fictional artists' (self) portraits exhibit an affinity with institutional critique: both aim to reveal aspects of reality behind the representations that conceal it.



Collection Yoon-Ja Choi & Paul Devautour, 1982-92. Exhibition views *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Photo: Useful Art Services.



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Room 3 : The Yoon-Ja Choi & Paul Devautour Collection

Art Keller, Richard Allibert, and Gladys Clover... They are just a few of the many fictional artists collected by the French artists Yoon-Ja Choi & Paul Devautour. Until 1985, both create art under their own names, only to then embrace the complexity and layered nature of various fictional alter egos and roles within the art world.

Only a portion of the Yoon-Ja Choi & Paul Devautour collection is exhibited in *Alias*. Martin Tupper, who operates as an artist, critic and at the same time is a fictional alias of Yoon-Ja Choi & Paul Devautour, conceived the arrangement of the collection as Martin Tupper's *Show Room of the Yoon-Ja Choi & Paul Devautour Collection* (1992). It simultaneously evokes a showroom, an art fair booth, or the domestic setting of a private collection.



Darko Maver, Eva & Franco Mattes, 1998-1999. Exhibition views Alias, M Leuven. Courtesy of Eva & Franco Mattes. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Exhibition views *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Photo: Useful Art Services.

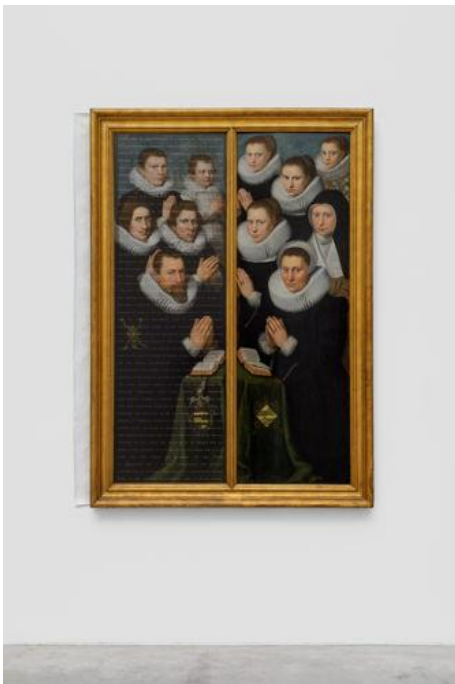


Untitled, Alfred Johansen, 1966. Courtesy of Alfred Johansen Estate, Odense.





Exhibition views *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Les Temps: Formes, Storm van Helsing, 2024. Addition to the *Two side panels of a triptych with donor portraits of Philippe Otten and Catharina van Opstal*, Anonymous, ca. 1620-1625. Collection M Leuven. Courtesy of Gareth James. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Apartment 5, Florence Hasard, 1942. Exhibition views *Alias*, M Leuven. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Useful Art Services.



La métamorphose d'une femme assassinée, Justine Frank, 1941. Courtesy of Roe Rosen.

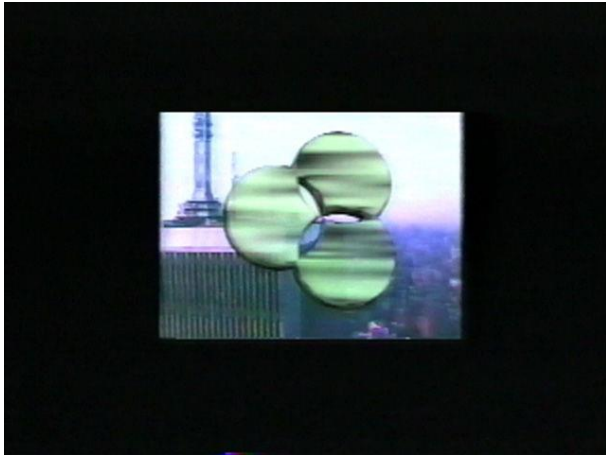
Room 4: Rewriting the Past

Creating a fictional art practice today can also impact the past. By supposedly bringing historically but entirely fictional artists to life with their own context and narrative, a piece of history is corrected. And, although the practices of Justine Frank, Darko Maver or Florence Hasard are figments of imagination, as spectators, we are eager to believe in these stories presented as proven facts.

Their history is brought together by the most diverse pieces of evidence, such as vintage photos and film fragments, press clippings, and documentaries with interviews of those involved, ... Not only the creation of this evidence but also how it is exhibited, and

communicated to an audience, reinforces the authenticity of these practices that rewrite the past.

They demonstrate that historiography is not finished but is still in full development. Creating a new version of what the past could have been, often from the perspective of a marginalised social position, undermines the effect of historical distance: as if history is conveniently something from long-gone times that do not concern us.



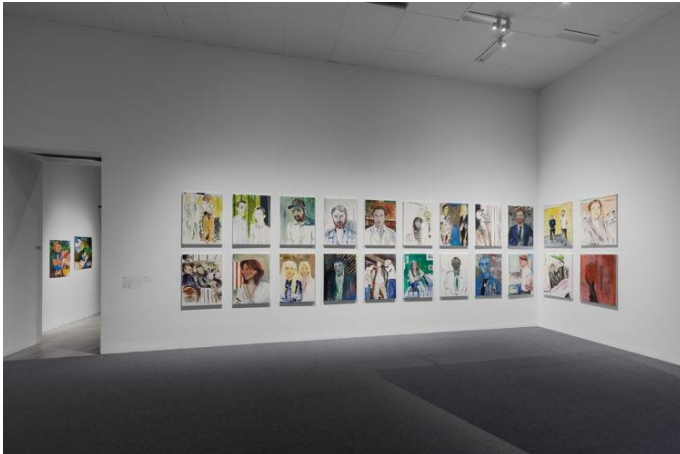
The BC Corporate Story (still), Bernadette Corporation, 1996. Courtesy of Bernadette Corporation, Greene Naftali, New York, and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.



Nature morte (still), Leo Josefstein, 1971. Courtesy of Bart Spillemaeckers.



Racer Car and C2H6O2, Henry Codax, 2012. Exhibition views *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Exhibition views *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Experiments for Auto-communication (still), Hubert Van Es, 1975. Courtesy of Florent Bex.



INKBLOT DRAWING, JUNE 12, 2005, Emily Feather, 2005. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Forty Minutes, Vern Blosum, 1963. Courtesy of the estate of Vern Blosum and Maxwell Graham, New York.

Room 5: Defying the Art World

Fictional art frequently functions within a framework borrowed from reality; it may encompass historical contexts but just as easily the contemporary art world..

Various fictional artists take liberties with the (un)written rules of the so-called art system by portraying themselves as actors from within that art world. Thus, individuals like Leo Josefstein or Hubert Van Es claim to be artists even though they hold very different authoritative roles within the Belgian artistic scene. Alternatively, from a fictional artist like Emily Feather, a desire arises for anonymity and the abandonment of individual authorship.

The anonymous group of artists, Bernadette Corporation, adopts a quasi-corporate identity, to critique a global culture that constructs identity through consumption and branding. In 2005, Bernadette Corporation releases the jointly written novel 'Reena Spaulings', which would then serve as the foundation for new artist initiatives such as Henry Codax or the collective project Reena Spaulings, which functions as both an artist persona and an art gallery located in New York.



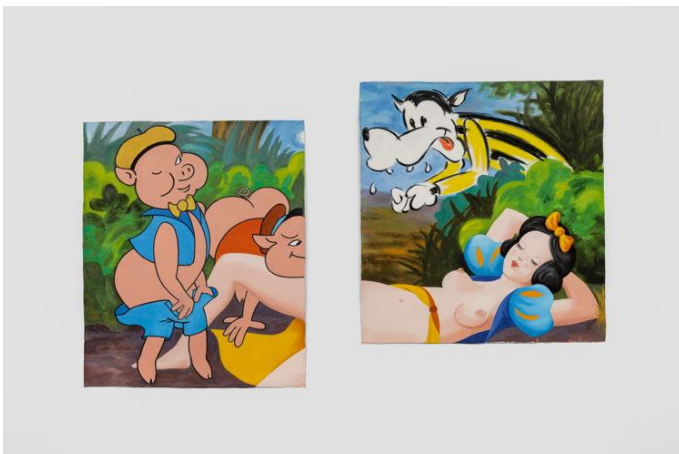
ART THOUGHTZ: How to Make an Art. Addendum (Part 2ish) (still), Hennessy Youngman, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.



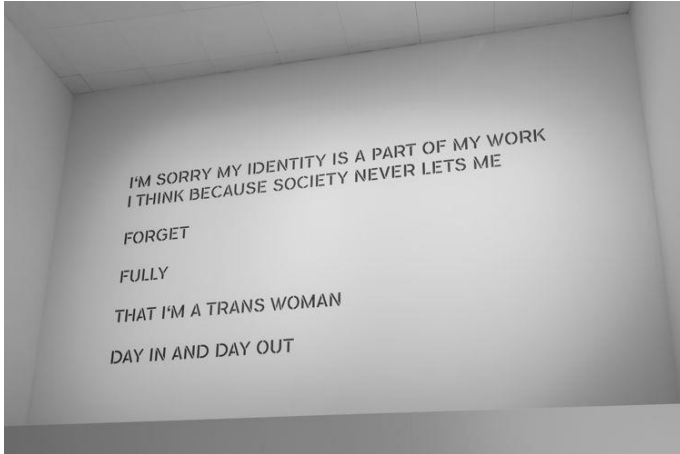
From the Archives of Modern Art (still), Eleanora Antinova, 1987. ©Eleanor Antin / Cnap – Centre national des arts plastiques (France).



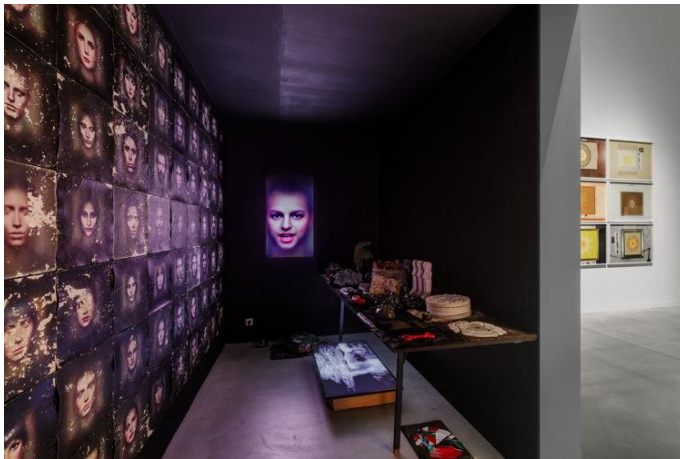
Short Sad Text (Based on the Borders of 14 Countries), Oksana Pasaiko, 2004. Collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Gent. Photo: Dirk Pauwels.



Blanche-neige et les petits cochons, NV Pannel, 1986-2023. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Useful Art Services.



I'M SORRY MY IDENTITY IS PART OF MY WORK / I THINK BECAUSE SOCIETY NEVER LETS ME / FORGET / FULLY / THAT I'M A TRANS WOMAN / DAY IN AND DAY OUT, Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), 2022. Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Gloria.B, Various Artists, 2024. Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Appendix 153, Suha Traboulsi, 2019. Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery, Beirut · Hamburg. Photo: Useful Art Services.



Gloria.B, Various Artists, 2024. Exhibition view *Alias*, M Leuven, 2024. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Useful Art Services.

Room 6: The Urgency of an Alias

Fictional art can address pressing societal issues such as culture, identity, gender, politics, and censorship. It's always uncertain whether opting for fictional artistry is driven by the intention to offer a platform for conveying potentially contentious messages.

The works in this room testify to engagement and the relevance of fictional artistry within the societal debate. Does fictional artistry provide a safe position to create politically inspired (Oksana Pasaiko) or explicit work (NV Panneel)? Does fictional artistry imply a means to disappear as an attempt to be free without being judged or discriminated against (Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo))? Are we sufficiently aware that Western art history is often unnecessarily projected as a reference to artworks that don't even subscribe to that tradition (Suha Traboulsi)? What form takes a fictional art production created within the context of a totalitarian regime (Charles Rosenthal)?