

Nav Haq in conversation with
Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys

Your works, especially the videos, seem to me to have strong visual connections to a wide spectrum of visual culture – everything from the austerity of Samuel Beckett plays through to the homespun charm and nostalgia of children’s television. Could you tell me about your influences?

Thys: There was this scene, the final scene in ‘Händler der vier Jahreszeiten’ by Fassbinder where the main character Hans Epp is sitting at the head of a table in a bar surrounded by some ‘friends’ and his wife Frau Epp. After drinking 20 schnapps he falls dead with his head on the table. It is an extremely German scene and the monologue in this scene by Hans Epp has worked like a mantra for us for 25 years. Then during boring trips to Germany and France we encountered these characters (people, architecture, puppets) in remote cities that we got obsessed and traumatised by, and then slowly developed them into main characters. You know that these characters or strange situations will never leave our minds. There is the character of Aline, a woman in her forties living in La Louviere. She is obsessed with a disgusting recipe with scampi. She is also very active in swinger’s clubs in Wallonia. There is a very brutal waiter working in an old restaurant in Berchtesgaden saying only one thing: “So ist Das.” (“that’s the way it is.”) There are two young killers in the outskirts of Antwerp that are caught and forced by police to re-enact the murder they committed in the bushes near the highway, but they cannot do it because they cannot stop laughing. There is a place called Velden in the province of Carinthia in Austria. It’s a small village near a big lake. The houses are a mixture of Austrian traditional style and contemporary minimalist architecture. The people within this village are bored and obedient. Each day of the year at 9pm they all go as one big group to the lake to ‘enjoy’ a spectacle of light, water and music, with huge video projections of Pavarotti and Austrian orchestras playing Strauss, onto fountains.

de Gruyter: There was this very strange and scary series for children on Flemish television in the 70s called “Van Den Vos Reynaerde”, (based on the story from the 13th century). It was something between a live puppet theatre and an animation film. Filmed in black and white with very old cameras, the image was similar to the TV images from the first man on the moon. Very vague. It looked a bit like a hallucination. This keeps coming back all the time. There are also lots of shops that inspire us, furniture shops, craft-material shops and folklore museums in France and Germany.

I would very much like to hear how about how exactly you both collaborate. Is there a specific process, and has it changed over time?

Thys: It’s almost the same process in a way. Looking for a long time, suffering, a lot of anxiety and excitement, and then slowly executing the plan. de Gruyter: That is a secret! A work mostly starts with a kind of mutual agreement about a certain atmosphere in a situation, or a person, or a scene in a film. Then we make maquettes until something comes out. There isn’t a lot of discussion between us. Car rides are extremely important in our practice, to enter into a kind of trance.

I’m interested in the characters that you portray, which are very often those that are considered marginalised in society. Often, such as in your works *Ten Weyngaert*, *Der Schlamm von Branst* and *The Frigate*, they are presented within designated places in society for people to participate in social and artistic activities, such as community centres. Can you tell me about the characters and the places that you depict?

Thys: These community centres are like small artificial, compressed copies of a non-existing ideal society outside of these buildings. They offer activities which officially help to maintain and optimise this utopian outside world. Within these centres one can improve their skills as an artist or sportsman or cook. But actually they are not focused at all on any individual fulfilment but rather on being part of a

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group and giving the illusion of being creative. We are interested in these groups that wander about, and the sad human aspects that are hidden or become proper to these groups, like depression, autism, power games, psychosis, sexual tensions and idolatry. These activities are also organised by a bureaucratic apparatus with the same sad characteristics. The combination of these groups within this self-created sealed environment leads to an implosion of human will. At the same time this kind of lack of any human will that is translated into depression and autism opens a beautiful world that is mute and passive.

Very often the works operate in a “non-verbal” way. Emotions are expressed through other means rather than words. What do you think this brings to the work?

Thys: When we film a close up of a face or an object there is always this silence which grows and becomes intrinsic to the person or object that is filmed. Therefore the filming itself is also very exhausting for us. Everything is silent but also under a lot of tension. It’s a kind of aura which starts to develop and becomes more tangible than the actual thing. The actions become therefore more like rituals which the characters have to perform. These silent rituals can sometimes be interrupted by an outburst of primal noises. The lack of sound also allows the inner life of the characters to become more complex. A bit like in the animal world. Like for example in the film ‘Au hasard Balthazar’ by Robert Bresson where the donkey Balthazar is introduced to other animals that have to perform in the same circus, like an ape, an elephant and a tiger. There is this strong silent exchange of gazes between the animals which is from a higher enigmatic level in contrast with the verbal, weak brutality of the humans.

de Gruyter: I think it can take you into a kind of trance. The fact that you feel that you are actually looking opens your brain. I once saw an exhibition of engravings by Callot which you had to visit with a magnifying glass because the pictures were very small. You really had to make an effort to look, but once you

made the effort, you entered a completely new universe in another time.

Puppets and mannequins have begun to appear regularly in your work, and will be prominent in *OPTIMUNDUS*. What is it that draws you to them?

Thys: It is maybe a reach into the nothingness. It started when we directed our ‘real’ actors in such a mechanical way that the next step — using puppets — became quite logical. We like a lot of these privately run museums for puppets. Mostly there is something wrong with the position of their limbs. They are asexual and hang on the machines they are supposed to operate. When you put a puppet on a chair or in a bed, when you disguise him as another puppet, nothing happens. The situation becomes embarrassing and very boring. It demands a lot of discipline from us and we have to take long pauses with the humans in order to be able to concentrate on the puppets again.

de Gruyter: We started to make puppets a few years ago. Before that we had worked with stuffed animals in a few videos, but the puppets or robots, are closer to the human body. Also, Styrofoam heads which are quite easy to get hold of are nice to work with because you can give them any expression that you want by gluing some hair on them, paint them or manipulate them the way you want. For the characters in *Das Loch*, the first video — in which the cast totally exists out of these kinds of creatures — we could go very far in physically creating the “actors”, which gives them in my opinion an extra layer. Also the knowledge that a puppet has eternal life is very inspiring to me. In 200 years people can still visit the sculpture of Ricco & Rocco, or say a prayer next to the dead body of Johannes the painter.

Moving on to the exhibition at M HKA — *OPTIMUNDUS*. What sort of experience should the public expect?

Thys: When we develop an exhibition or a work, we always include the public from the very beginning. Like for example the show ‘Projekt 13’ that we had in

Kunsthalle Basel. There we imagined mainly Swiss well-educated visitors that would wander around 500 drawings made with pencil. It was the combination of craftsmanship and a sense of tradition for these visitors that helped us make these 500 drawings. The show was white and actually there was not really a lot to see (as it was too white). They were punished in a very civilised way. For our show at Le Plateau in Paris together with François Curlet we had the whole exhibition painted grey: the objects on display, the plinths and even the windows. It was like entering a silent spaceship from the far future.... For the M HKA I sense a kind of empty silence. A confrontation between the gazes of the elements in the show and the gazes of the visitor. When the museum is closed at night the elements continue interfacing with each other.

de Gruyter: It’s the first time that we’ve put many works together. All the works are a part of *OPTIMUNDUS*. It will be an exhibition in which we are absent. *OPTIMUNDUS* is created by an anonymous force. This force can be compared to a kind of superbrain. We as artists are only humble slaves of this brain. We do everything that is in our power to obey the brain. If we make a mistake we will be severely punished. We will probably not survive. In any case, the punishment for the public will be even more severe.

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The artists would like to thank
Danny Vandeput (metal sculptures), Francisca Lambrechts (clay sculptures), Jeroen Provoost (fountain sculpture & White Elements), Jana Philips & Margot Vanheusden, Tony Video, Arthur Sallustrau & Pali Barine (assistance), Caroline Dimalin (translations book), Galerie Isabella Borolozzi, Galerie Micheline Swaiger, Nav Haq, Bart De Baets, Dieter Roelstraete, team M HKA, Nicolaus Schafhausen, Jef Cuypers (*OPTIMUNDUS* book)

“There are different theories. One of them states that the parallel world is a mirror of the real world and every attack from the parallel world would therefore be a form of self-destruction.”

From Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys's video *About the Relationship Between the Real World and the Parallel World*, 2010

Introduction

Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys's art casts a merciless perspective on reality. Through their numerous artistic approaches – including installations, video, drawing, sculpture, performance and photographs – de Gruyter and Thys visualise their imaginings of the parallel world inherent within the modern human psyche, along with how it manifests itself in the everyday aspects of life and civic conformity. Everything from work, leisure and family, to social class, masculinity and marginalisation are envisaged through convening an unlikely cast of non-professional actors, family members, friends, beards, objects and mannequins alike, often in banal, homespun settings that are rife with awkward power dynamics.

Their major exhibition at M HKA entitled *OPTIMUNDUS*, is the broadest presentation of their work in Belgium and internationally to date, followed by a second chapter at Kunsthalle Wien early in 2014. The artists will create an environment bringing together a key selection of their works in all media, alongside a number of new works. *OPTIMUNDUS* is a kind of panorama of de Gruyter and Thys's practice, bringing their unique conception of the alternative reality into the realm of an exhibition scenario. Form balances the work of de Gruyter and Thys on the edge of the idiotic. Ragged mannequins are made to share common space with traced

drawings of trams, polystyrene heads with false facial hair, and monotonous monologues about renovations. Visitors to *OPTIMUNDUS* are joined by these and a cast of existing and new mannequins from the artists' own universe.

The artists are inspired by myriad sources – like key scenes in films by Visconti or Fassbinder; reality television; the arsenal of videos that YouTube offers, ranging from Russian road rage to the home videos of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov; as well as traumatic events the artists have experienced over the years with various people and places. Their videos are often set within the confines of spaces where the emotion of relationships is expressed and a heart of bleakness is palpable. They are works that not only reflect on the broad issues of social class and deprivation but also consider our ways of dealing with life through the logic of our inner worlds. The works *Der Schlamm von Branst* (2008); *Ten Weyngaert* (2007); and *The Frigate* (2008), for example, portray the banal, tense environments of community spaces designated for people to participate in artistic activity as forms of social interaction and therapy. However, straightforward dialogue is replaced by events of the perverse and supernatural kind, seemingly occurring through curious, aggressive processes of sublimation.

In their most recent works, human characters are replaced altogether by make-shift dummies with limited features, inhuman computerised voices and a certain emptiness at their core. For example, the video *Das Loch* (2010), presents an all-mannequin cast, and will also here incorporate a constellation of related mannequins and installations. This deadpan work describes the complex rivalry between two artists – Johannes, who believes in the universal expression of painting, and who feels insecure by the success of his friend Fritz, a red macho-man with an HD camera. Whereas in their recent video *Les énigmes de Saarlouis* (2012), the twin characters Kitty & Katty confront us with a series of impossible riddles. It is this internal, ungraspable logic which each of us possess that we are persistently reminded of in the work of de Gruyter and Thys, and which is at the core of *OPTIMUNDUS*.

Jos de Gruyter (b. 1965) and Harald Thys (b. 1966) live and work in Brussels.

De drie wijsneuzen

This sculpture is a variation on *De drie wijsneuzen van Erembodegem*, a proposal for a sculpture on a roundabout near this Flemish village. Three heads look from up high, and each faces a different direction. The “Wise-Noses” observe visitors and return the glances of onlookers. The sound of running water is one of the few things visitors will hear in the exhibition. This fountain focuses our attention towards the acts of looking or staring – important characteristics in the work of de Gruyter & Thys.

White Element

The *White Elements* remind us of flattened characters, like what often appeared in classic cartoons. Each of the *White Elements* also has a drawing of a face attached on either side, making them resemble the Roman god Janus who symbolised new beginnings or transitions. This series of 9 beings were inspired by 'White Elements', an annual rave near Velden am Wörther See, Austria, where party-goers dress entirely in white clothes. The *White Elements* symbolise the inhabitants of *OPTIMUNDUS*, who experience the world in different dimensions.

Untitled

Dispersed around the exhibition is this series of traced drawings made with pencil on paper. The drawings are of trams from France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, The Netherlands and New Zealand. Deliberately depicting the mundane, some of the drawings portray their interiors with people sitting or standing. These people and the trams, the artists tell us, are some of the silent inhabitants of *OPTIMUNDUS*. According to the artists, the technique of tracing comes the closest to the visual experience of the *OPTIMUNDUS*: a one-dimensional white world consisting of lines.

About the Relation Between the Real World and the Parallel World

Occasionally presented by the artists as a lecture, the video *About the Relationship Between the Real World and the Parallel World* is the pseudo-scientific explanation de Gruyter & Thys give for the existence of the parallel world. Narrated through the voice of Thys's father, the artists tell us the parallel world disguises itself as the real world – “There are different theories. One of them states that the parallel world is a mirror of the real world and every attack from the parallel world would therefore be a form of self-destruction.” The existence of the parallel world within the everyday is illustrated using clips from various sources inserted within the video. This work effectively describes a sort of existential crisis for humanity at the heart of what we understand as reality, and a desire for it to be replaced by an alternative.

Ten Weyngaert

The opening scene in *Ten Weyngaert* is set within a typical location in de Gruyter and Thys's videos: a starkly lit, bare, impersonal interior, where nine people stand silently in a row, waiting to be killed by gun fire. The inspiration for *Ten Weyngaert* is the eponymous community centre in Brussels. The actors do not speak but mutter and laugh as if possessed. The only voice heard is of the paternal narrator telling the story of a man who is aroused when he squeezes black mice from Belarus to death. Everybody is nameless except for Tim & Tom, two guards who harass the residents. The scenes are interspersed with otherworldly scenes in a non-descript dark space where a strange game takes place. *Ten Weyngaert* ends with a scene similar to the initial one, but the striking difference is that the characters have disappeared.

Der Schlamm von Branst

Der Schlamm von Branst (*The Mud from Branst*) takes place within the mundane confines of an activity centre where a cast of characters are spending their time making clay sculptures. These sculptures, which could be considered here as manifestations from the depths of male sublimation, are attempts to create representations of such things as a horse's head, the human body and human heads, all of which appear amateurish and mildly phallic. Again, the scenario operates on a level that is pre-verbal, and a single woman sits whimpering, holding a block of clay to her stomach.

The Frigate

Like the two previous films, *The Frigate* is set within a community centre in which a group of men, a woman and a cameraman are involved in a peculiar scenario revolving around a model of a black ship. The communication between the men and the woman is entirely non-verbal, creating a series of silent tableaux. A Freudian symbol of the female sexuality that men desire, the ship causes the male characters to behave perversely around the woman, forcing her to engage in poses that resemble those seen in pornographic films. Perhaps read as a comment on the normalisation of hetero-normative gender roles, *The Frigate* considers the violent and dehumanised body in mass media.

The organ music soundtrack is by Erik Thys who also appears in the video, and is available to purchase as a vinyl record at the M HKAshop.

Das Loch

In their most recent works such as *Das Loch* (*The Hole*), de Gruyter and Thys have replaced actors with mannequins that have limited features, inhuman computerised voices and a certain emptiness at their core. *Das Loch* describes the complex rivalry that exists between two characters – Johannes, who believes in the universal expression of painting, and Fritz, a little red macho-man in possession of an HD camera. Johannes's empathic wife Hildegard, in a role that reduces her to the female stereotype from film history, acts as the linchpin for her husband's emotions. Within the *OPTIMUNDUS* exhibition, the characters present from this work are Fritz, Hildegard, Ricco & Rocco, Tommy the Singing Trumpet, and Johannes amongst an expansive display of his paintings.

Les énigmes de Saarlouis

Using computerised voices, the twin characters in this video, Kitty & Katty, present us with a series of enigmatic riddles. In fact they are so complicated that they are near impossible to decipher. Referencing the German town of Saarlouis near the French border, This work is made entirely using simply constructed mannequins and a series of hypnotic, slow-moving camera shots. Kitty & Katty themselves are present within the exhibition too.

Publication

A 2-part publication is being produced to accompany the exhibitions. *OPTIMUNDUS: M HKA 08 02 13 — 19 05 13* is published by M HKA, Kunsthalle Wien and Sternberg Press, with contributions by Michael Van den Abeele, Nav Haq, Jennifer Krasinski, Dieter Roelstraete, Peter Wächter and Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys. *OPTIMUNDUS: Kunsthalle Wien 30 01 14 — 30 03 14* will be published in 2014.

M HKA Ensembles

Visit ensembles.org/events/optimundus to find out more on Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys.

Guided Tours of the Exhibition

For those who want to know more, our team of professional guides stands ready to give you an initiated tour of this thought-provoking exhibition. These tours must be booked in advance. Bookings: Tel. +32 (0)3 260 99 90 (Monday – Friday: 9–12am; 1–5pm), Email: ontvangt@muhka.be

Individual visitors can follow a walking lecture on Sundays between 2 and 3pm, for which no reservation is necessary. You will find more information about these offers on our website: www.muhka.be

M HKA Kunsthalle Wien

M HKA is an initiative of the Flemish Community and supported by City of Antwerp, the National Lottery, Klara, Cobra.be and H ART



Additional Information

Interview