

OPTIMUNDUS

Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys

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"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

Jos de Gruyter &
Harald Thys,
Optimundus, 2012

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 & 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 marginalization are envisaged through convening an unlikely cast of non-professional actors, family members, friends, beads, objects and mannequins alike, often in banal, homespun settings that are rife with awkward power dynamics.

Their major exhibition at M HKA entitled *OPTIMUNDUS* – will be 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* will be a kind of panorama of de Gruyter & 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 & Thys on the edge of the idiotic. Ragged mannequins are made to share common space with traced drawings of trams, the cries of animals, polystyrene heads with false facial hair, and monotonous monologues about renovations. Visitors to *OPTIMUNDUS* will also be 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* (The Clay from 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 makeshift dummies with limited features, inhuman computerised voices and a certain emptiness at their core. For example, the video *Das Loch* (The Hole, 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* (The Riddles of Saarlouis, 2012), the twin characters Kitty & Katty confront us with a series of impossible riddles. It is this internal, ungraspable logic that each of us possess that we are persistently reminded of in the work of de Gruyter & Thys, and which will be at the core of *OPTIMUNDUS*.