

**JOS DE GRUYTER & HARALD THYS**  
**“TEN WEYNGAERT”**

Working together for nearly two decades, Brussels-based Belgian artist duo Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys have developed a distinct body of video and film works that reveal a strong affinity with – and occasional debt to – the sinister counter-traditions of a typically Belgian, *noir* surrealism. Striking a fine balance between despairing, existential gloom and *grand guignol*-styled absurdism, their crude narrative dramas – with not much linear narrative to speak of – often depart from local circumstances (the depressing, petty parochialism of a non-descript Flemish suburbia) to address decidedly universal concerns, such as the noxious potential for a descent into a nightmare of truly Kafkaian dimensions that lurks in all human relationships. No matter how harsh the symbolic reductionism that characterize their ‘sets’ – sometimes no more than a grey, carpet-clad box with (and this seems especially important) no windows or doors to the outside world – these narratives are almost invariably staged in *social* spaces, the sites of primary human interaction: the nuclear family’s kitchen or living room most regularly, or the broader circle of the local community center – the backdrop (if we can call it that) of *Ten Weyngaert*. Finally, even though these bizarre dreamworlds are often frequented by a recurring cast of non-professional actors, many of whom are recruited from the artists’ families and friends, it is the programmatic use of makeshift robots, puppets and dummies in their older work that clearly sets their work apart from similar ‘sociological’ musings, as it offers an even more crudely literal form to reflect upon the machinic nature of the social sphere. As Monika Szewczyk has put it, “The artists seek ways to confront marginal, incapacitated, lost and alienated subjects without defining these ‘others’ in sociological terms. In this sense, and especially in their novel use of a ghoulish humor, Thys and de Gruyter broaden the scope of reflection on socially produced behavior.”

The center piece of this, their first solo exhibition in Berlin, is the eponymous “*Ten Weyngaert*”, their most ambitious narrative film to date. Named after a Brussels Community Center that once served gloriously utopian goals (cultural, educational and social) but has since morphed into an island populated by a host of undesirable others – “weyngaert” means “vineyard” in old Flemish – the film features a priestly figure in top hat and blackface and a flock of cowering humans of all stripes that together constitute an enclosed micro-universe of strictly defined pyramidal hierarchies. Much like the sad downward spiral in which many community centers just like the original *Ten Weyngaert* in Brussels got caught – to put it rather bluntly: from seventies quasi-socialist utopianism to a contemporary dystopia – Thys & de Gruyter’s *Ten Weyngaert* chronicles the vagaries of group psychology and role-play, to alternately scathing and hilarious effect.

As an accompaniment to the film, the artists produced a suite of thirteen drawings, each based on a still from the movie. The drawings, which range in style from the purely representational to the rather more abstract, were made using tracing paper, and then photocopied to produce the slightly alienating final result – a conscious move to obfuscate the issue of authorship and gestural creation that both reflects the artists’ preoccupation with issues of authority proper (hence *Ten Weyngaert*’s savage storyline) and expresses their shared love of ‘poor’, bureaucratic materials to depict the stark poverty of what Theodor Adorno has termed the “administered world.”

In 2007, the work of Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys was shown in solo exhibitions in MuHKA (Antwerp, B), Artspeak (Vancouver, CAN), and Le Plateau (Paris, F; in

collaboration with François Curlet); in 2008, they will take part in the fifth Berlin Biennial and Manifesta 7 in Trento.

*Dieter Roelstraete*