

Pavilion of Belgium at the 58th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia

MONDO CANE
by Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys
curated by Anne-Claire Schmitz
11 May to 24 November 2019
Commissioner: Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles

At the 58TH International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, the Belgian Pavilion is showing MONDO CANE, a project by artists Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, curated by Anne-Claire Schmitz. MONDO CANE was selected and announced as Belgium's representation to the Biennale Arte in July 2018 by Alda Greoli, the Minister of Culture of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles. The project depicts a society that is folded in on itself where tradition is erected as a refuge.

The exhibition MONDO CANE presents itself as a local folkloric museum that displays the human figure. The inhabitants of the pavilion are silent, pale and frightened. They are aestheticized shells, stuck in a loop of formal activity that the visitor perceives as odd and out of touch with contemporary reality. The exhibition contains some twenty dolls, most of them automated; a series of large drawings of pastoral scenes; and steel bars that fence off the pavilion's lateral recesses. At the centre of the building there are artisans – such as a cobbler, a stonemason, a spinner... – who, true to themselves, ply their respective trades. The side rooms of the pavilion are a parallel world peopled by louts, zombies, poets, psychotics, the insane, and the marginalized. These two worlds exist in the same space, but they seem to be entirely unaware of one another. The gestures of the dolls are mechanical and awkward. The sounds and movements alternate and are activated by the visitors' presence via a motion detector at the entrance. The space is imbued with songs, plaintive cries and labour. The dolls' heads are modelled both on fictive characters that have already appeared in the work of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys and on real people. We enter the pavilion as we were entering a wonderland. Full of beauty and ugliness. In accordance with an age-old tradition, spectators allow themselves to be drawn by the promise of seeing wonderful things at an exhibition: 'A show well worth the while of parents and their children!' The Belgian Pavilion offers a real promenade, akin to a touristic or anthropological experience, reminiscent of an old Europe.

'Mondo cane' is an Italian expression that took on a very particular inflection following the release of an immensely popular film of that title in 1962. The film, which documents a series of cultural practices from across the world, spawned a genre – mondo films – whose defining characteristic is a pseudo-documentary approach that focuses on the sensational and privileges effect at the expense of content.

Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys have the habit of distilling fictions out of a reality that is, sometimes, 'too real.' Both willingly concede that they feel attracted to the psychotic state of contemporary societies, a state that they simultaneously dread and disseminate in their work. MONDO CANE, which seizes visitors with its off-kilter realism, is in every way a continuation of this practice. Without ever falling into cynicism or moralism, the artists deftly and wittily transform that which resembles fear or a latent state into something willed, critical and counter to the status quo.

The exhibition further develops through a publication and a website. The publication MONDO CANE consists of a compilation of articles that document a variety of facts and events of the world around us. Each article contains a descriptive text – appearing randomly in Dutch, English, French, German and Italian – as well as one or more illustrations. The tone adopted for the articles and drawings is informative, non-spectacular and monotonous. The website mondocane.net is an additional and artistic space for unfolding and exploring the ideas of the exhibition, and that allows visitors to navigate randomly through hundreds of videos selected by the artists.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS AND THE CURATOR

For over thirty years, the artists Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys have created a body of work whose rigour and consistency are rare. Their collaboration has given birth to a highly singular language that distinguishes itself in our dense contemporary visual culture not just by its tonality, but also by its disconcerting insistence and normality. Together, Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys make films, drawings, paintings, photographs and sculptures in which we find characters, objects and spaces that are at once ultra-identifiable and non-authoritarian. The human behaviour seen in their work stems from the social and psychological pressures exerted by the real world. The only possible communication in their work, which they avow without prudishness, is binary and stereotyped. The anonymity that emerges from it is that of a residual reality. The surrounding authority is just as transparent as it is empty. Society is deaf, repetitive and annoying. Jos de Gruyter (b. 1965) and Harald Thys (b. 1966) live in Brussels.

The curator Anne-Claire Schmitz is the director of La Loge a contemporary art space dedicated to contemporary art, architecture and theory in Brussels. Alongside her work at La Loge, she curated exhibitions such as Les Bons Sentiments the 19th Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard Prize (2017) in Paris; Individual Stories – Collecting as Portrait and Methodology, at Kunsthalle Wien (2015); or acted as the Belgian correspondent for the project Europe Europe initiated by Thomas Boutoux, Gunnar B. Kvaran and Hans-Ulrich Obrist at the Oslos's Astrup Fearnley Museet (2014). Prior to La Loge, Anne-Claire Schmitz was a curator at Witte de With, Centre for Contemporary Art, in Rotterdam. In 2012, WIELS invited Anne-Claire Schmitz to conceive, with Elena Filipovic, the exhibition Un-Scene II. Her experience as exhibition curator goes hand in hand with her occasional engagements in the world of teaching, her participation in juries and selection committees, and the writing of texts. Her collaboration with Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys on the occasion of the 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia (2019) is an embodiment of the country's cultural synergy and of the vitality of its artistic field. Together, they are bound by a shared engagement, characterized by a field practice divorced from administrative concerns, in Belgium's cultural field. Following an open call for projects launched by Alda Greoli, the Minister of Culture of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Anne-Claire Schmitz suggested the artists to hand in a project together to represent Belgium at the Biennale Arte 2019.

EXHIBITION SCHEDULE: KEY DATES

MONDO CANE

Professional days of the Belgian Pavilion at the 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia
8 to 10 May 2019 – Official Opening May 8th at 2 pm
Giardini, Venice

MONDO CANE

Exhibition of the Belgian Pavilion at the 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia
11 May to 24 November 2019
Giardini, Venice

PRESS CONTACTS

INTERNATIONAL

Press (International): Silke Neumann — silke.neumann@bureau-n.de — +49 171 5238765

BELGIUM

Press (French): Laurence Morel — laurence@nakami.be — +32 473.68.32.38
Press (Dutch): Sarah Vermeulen — sarah-claire@serenai.be — +32 474.85.36.37

CABINET OF THE MINISTER OF CULTURE

Christian Carpentier — christian.carpentier@gov.cfwb.be — +32 475.86.06.13
More information available on: www.belgianpavilion.be

