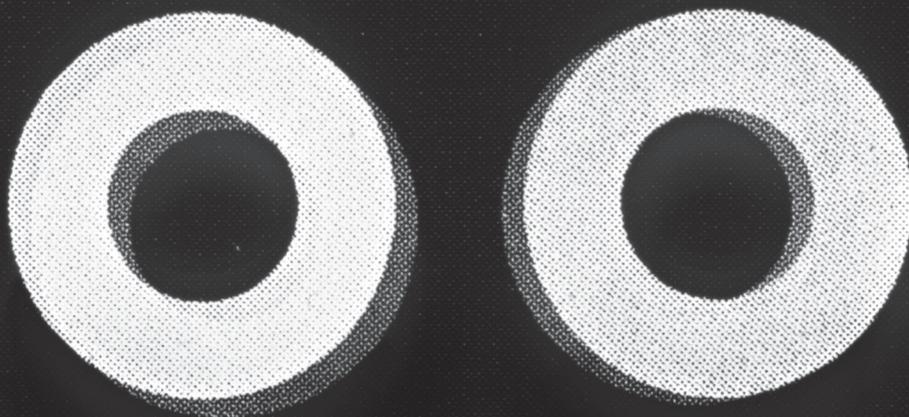


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Willem
Oorebeek



OBSTAKLES

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“ Every print is the result of a process of contact and release, which links it immediately to themes of touch, presence, and intimacy – but also to themes of loss, separation, and memory. ”

— Jennifer L. Roberts

Among the many disciplines that his artistic practice encompasses, Willem Oorebeek (1953, NL) is first and foremost a printer. He works mainly with mass-produced images, which he selects in order to manipulate and transpose them using different printing processes. He transforms these normally banal objects of communication that saturate our visual environment into pictorial surfaces produced by ‘pressure’, exploring the malleability of the structure of images, between abstraction and representation, form and sign. Through duplication, copying, and translation, Oorebeek questions the dominant visual culture and our public space—media, advertising, dissemination politics—along with notions of authorship and originality. Against the proliferation of images and the erosion of their aura, he draws out their power of attraction and their brutal indiscretion. The image is thus summoned in its duality: as the surface through which we perceive the world and which simultaneously blocks our access to reality.

Spread over two parts, in two distinct, associative, and non-chronological displays, *OBSTAKLES* bears witness to a rigorous, cyclical practice initiated at the beginning of the 1980s. Willem Oorebeek has sought to develop an impersonal method of appropriation and reproduction. Experimenting with various transfer techniques, above all lithography and digital processes, his work is based on a tense balance between dynamic rhythms and monotony, between archaism and modernity, investigating not only technical processes but also their allegorical and social implications.

First floor

At the heart of Oorebeek's approach is the human figure, through which he explores the politics of the image, the appeal of icons, and the humor that emerges from their overexposure in the collective imagination. The performative dimension of the *cliché*—a term which etymologically derives from the 'click' emitted when the printing die strikes molten metal—is present in several of his series, including his works based on election posters or magazine covers, as well as in the *Vertical Club* series, a selection of prints from which opens the exhibition. Initiated in 1994, *Vertical Club* is a collection of portraits taken mainly from magazines. In order to gain access to the club, the figures must be depicted full-length and staring at the lens, in a sign of consent, of conformity to social norms. This practice raises the question of the portrait, which often precedes the subject, depersonalizing them. The portrait thus becomes a means of capturing the individual, but also a generative, interchangeable, homogenising practice. Some of these figures have also been incorporated into the publication *Vertikal Klub* (2013), pages from which Oorebeek has overprinted back into a series of large-format prints for the exhibition that seek the absurd while revealing their deathly nature. In this way, the work functions as a loop, reinvesting images and modes of display in a continuous process of displacement through repetition. By applying methods of content recycling to his own work, he turns artistic production into self-consumption.

In a way, the internal circulation of the exhibition continues the principles of reconfiguration at play in his early works. Hanging from the long transverse picture rail, which acts as a pivot, are works from the 1980s–1990s from various collections as well as from the studio. This section juxtaposes period prints with recent reprints of archival images whenever the originals were no longer accessible. The materiality of these pieces and the experimentation with the potentials of various printing techniques are highlighted through changing dots per inch, variations, inversions, and shifts in alignment. These components, which recur throughout Oorebeek’s practice, create visual tensions. The role played by color, or its reduction, reinforces the distancing effect. While these techniques have their own aesthetic, they also reveal a singular career path, as Oorebeek was distancing himself from dominant artistic currents from as early as his formative years in 1970–1975. He rejected painterly expressionism, but he also stood his ground against the impact of Pop Art, as well as the procedures of the conceptual movements, notably on the question of delegating the gesture of artistic production. The works exhibited here equally reflect his symbolic vocabulary and the contamination effect that drives his practice, transforming certain objects or images into visual trophies, artifacts that capture a historical moment while reinterpreting it.

Although his approach is focused on deconstructing stereotypes, Oorebeek became known for a method that has become emblematic of his practice. *BLACKOUTS*, begun in 1999, is a series that makes a link to other works reflecting the presence of the viewer. For Oorebeek’s work simultaneously engages with forms of media representation and the possibilities of perception. Overprinted, or obscured by black ink as in the *BLACKOUTS* series, his images function like a palimpsest: they enter into a continuous cycle of erasure and re-emergence, while the original source resists and disrupts, never completely submitting to obliteration. In the artist’s words, these distanced images take us through a “choreography of the gaze” requiring an active process of interpretation. The image frustrates our desire for immediate access, requiring instead a process of tension, reflection, and spatial displace-

ment in order to be apprehended. By blackening surfaces, he mobilises latent forms belonging to the subconscious and memory, to buried fragments, while at the same time questioning our unbridled, incredulous consumption of images. Here, the obstacle becomes a means of reanimating what seemed lost or invisible.

Second floor

The best way to move from the first to the second floor is via the stairs in the back room. In this way one encounters the horizontal installation *BILD, oder*, work created in collaboration with artist Joëlle Tuerlinckx. In addition, the work *Zero Point* that Tuerlinckx created for her solo show in 2012 is reactivated. The energy of *BILD, oder* comes from the associative dialogue between the two artists and the pooling of their respective archives: their own works, working notes, scraps, newspapers, posters, and other various sources preserved for various reasons. This accumulation of traces from their daily practice punctuates the flow of time. Initiated for the first time in 2004, this collaboration has been redeployed on several occasions. Both protocol-based and flexible, their approach interrogates the production of value and meaning through semiotic text-image constructions, notably through the play of superimposition and juxtaposition. *BILD, oder* thus invites iteration in the sense of a dynamic reading with the body across space and time. Seeing and walking are part of a process in which the challenge is to stop and develop new forms of visibility, déjà-vu, and memory.

Notions of visual saturation and image inflation are at the heart of Oorebeek's other compositions exhibited in the next room. Along the walls, several series of prints bring back proof sheets overprinted in colored ink. Among these is the arrangement *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (2022), whose title is inspired by Elizabeth Eisenstein's seminal 1979 work, composed of dozens of reprinted sheets, each one gone over in yellow ink. In these series, the format and logic of the print itself reflect the organisational system at the

heart of Oorebeek's concerns. For him, printing is not simply a means of reproducing texts or images—it becomes an active mode of structuring and reinterpreting knowledge. The printed page, with its layout, sequence, and typographic choices, becomes an allegory of knowledge itself—its organisation, dissemination, and transformation—with all that messages can also encrypt, whether voluntarily or as a result of their displacements, of losses in communication.

In Oorebeek's practice, this manifests itself in a paradoxical impulse towards preservation and accumulation, particularly significant in our contemporary digital age. What is accumulated remains fragmentary, its access vulnerable. These relations of ambivalence and doubling evoke an obsession with the archive, at once a bulwark against oblivion and a reflection of one's own inadequacy.

Curator: Pauline Hatzigeorgiou

BIOGRAPHY

Willem Oorebeek (1953, Netherlands) took courses in graphics, painting and drawing in Rotterdam from 1970 to 1975. He developed his practice in the Netherlands until he moved to Brussels in 1994, where he still lives and works. In 1997, he represented the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale together with Aernout Mik. From 2008 to 2020, he supervised the residency programme at WIELS. Recently, he decided to stop teaching and fully devote himself to his own artistic practice in his studio in Schaerbeek. Willem Oorebeek is represented by dépendance gallery, Brussels.

