

# Otty Park

‘Through My Eyes’ – Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx  
12.03- 17.04.2021

Ive Stevenheydens, March 2021

Where are we today as a society? A raging health crisis dictates societies and it leads to protests on a planet that dies (off) at an ever speeding pace. If we trim the demonstrations and outcries to their essence, they do not seldom articulate the need for a more defined identity for different communities: BLM, LGBTQIA+, *les gilets jaunes* or separatist movements of the left or the right.

While in the world of contemporary art the ‘who makes what’ turns more and more into a ‘who does what’ (a shift in accent from the work of art or object to the artist or subject), we, as a Western society, have lost the capacity to think.

Bernard Stiegler, deceased at the start of august 2020, already described this evolution as the ‘general proletarianization’ in his series of essays *Mécréance et Discrédit* (2004-2016). He points to the loss of *savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre*. Translated: thanks to our long lasting confidence and use of digital media, we’ve lost the capacity to reason for ourselves. Because honestly, why shouldn’t you just look it up on the internet? This evolution is far from innocent. Our thoughts (our knowledge and our know-how or expertise) are being wrapped up in a capitalistic, hyper commercial vortex and ran by algorithms. Our *state of exception* is being surrounded by surveillance, control and discipline. It’s being governed by a system we’ve created ourselves and it tends to get more and more out of control.

Welcome to 'Through My Eyes'! This is not the umpteenth *the-show-must-go-on-presentation*. This exhibition exposes itself as immersed in the events that relatively speaking took place the past one and a half year. It breaths the collective trauma’s we’ve experienced as a society during this health crisis, as well as the desires and aspirations we yearn for ever since. At the same time you find an ensemble of works that came about in a very personal and intuitive way. It doesn’t want to impose us anything. Nothing in 'Through My Eyes' is *in your face*. This debris of "the rollercoaster" that dragged the artist "from one feeling to another", presents itself humble and quiet in the first place. The lion’s share of these works dress themselves in sober black, white and grey colors, accordingly with this era.

'Through My Eyes' slightly differs from the relatively young oeuvre of Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx (1989, Antwerp). Partly: although it takes a turn, formally speaking, some influences, earlier on paraphrased by the artist, resonate. He also takes some routes of the past and elaborates on the lines of thoughts he started earlier on. For him life and art are entwined. It's shown directly and literally in his output.

Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx wears different hats. He got his double name from his stepfather who raised him since the age of two. This was already very clear in 2011 when he started the art space/ gallery Hole Of The Fox (or HOTFOX, until 2018). At that spot in Borgerhout housing, workshop and exhibition space overlapped. It often served as sport and recreational venue too. The artist is a fervent practitioner of martial arts (with a good bit of experience in disciplines like Wing Chun, Kali or Eskrima and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu). (\*) Besides artist, curator and man of sports Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx is also a deejay. He organizes parties regularly (at least if it's allowed). He's deeply passionate about (Japanese) pop culture, particularly about comics, gaming and movies; Manga, Anime, Cosplay (costume play) and figurines.

The exhibition 'Through My Eyes' has roughly two chapters. The first focuses on perception, looking and being looked at. The second is a symbolic invitation to the visitor. It's more about physical contact, or better, the desire to touch.

At the entrance of Otty Park the works 'It's man-made and it's moving the air' and 'We accelerated and didn't look back' (both from 2020) immediately stand out. These rather psychedelic works in Indian ink were created on the floor with a pencil for calligraphy, which broke off. The stick serves now as a writing pen. Physical contact with the medium is very important in the creative process of the artist. This involves sitting, laying down or standing on it. It comes together with his practice in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, a sport which is mainly practiced horizontally on the ground. Repetition and the re-use of motifs, another basic principle in martial arts, like in many electronic music, is central in all of his work. The abstract 'eyes', which represent the linen canvases, echo in the collages 'It burns', 'Open your eyes' and in the series 'Study' (2020). Although the cosmic and destructive dimension got more impact. The ran-out and at the same time fiercely burning eye in the painting 'Their eyes were burning with a fierce fire' (2020) is a continuation of the ten or more protest we witnessed over the last years. It saw the light in the midst of the BLM-protests. The work radiates sadness but is at the same time strong-willed too.

'Fake Avatar' and 'Golden Boy' (both from 2020) resemble the rather creepy looking characters in games (besides they refer to the movie Avatar of James Cameron from 2009). For the artist they could well represent the stress and our *keeping-up-appearances-attitude* during lockdown.

The clay masks 'Looking left', 'Looking straight' and 'Looking right' (2020) also elaborate on perception, the positioning of identity and disguise: returning concepts that Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx' researches in his work. How do we see each other? How do we present ourselves in order to appear as best as possible for the other? How do we translate ourselves

digitally? How do we pimp ourselves in games and on social media? How do person X, Y and Z define us and our characters?

In the second, more compact part of the exhibition the desire for togetherness and physical contact are pivotal. How do we keep going the dialogue with each other? How do we keep on communicating in this crisis? How do we keep contact?

'Too Much Screen Time' (2021), a collage of mobile phone drawings, borrowed from Manga's, winks at our behavior as *smombies*: the series makes a *swirl* from left to right, just until the subject disappears in the screen of the phone. The work could envision the quoted doom image of Bernard Stiegler, the one of individuals and societies that evolved into *proletarianized thinkers*. Also, the as butterflies presented series of collages made out of 'Yu Gi Oh!' playing cards do not foretell any good, with titles and subtitles like 'Capitalist', 'Conspiracy Theorist', 'Trump', 'Colonialist', 'Protestor' and 'Corona' (2020).

With the self-portraits 'Take My Hand' (2021) Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx takes off in the opposite direction. This repetitive study of hands looks a bit like the watercolor sketches of Rubens.

Squatted above a mirror, the artist tries to reproduce his hand as good as possible, exactly 55 times that is. This work, apart from a daydream about a biographical episode (a romance), is above all an open invitation, a reaching-out, a question to the viewer.

The collages 'Oh How I Long to Touch You' (2020) and 'Oh How I Long to Touch You 2' (2021) directly express desire. The titles could well be read as *memes*. For sure both resemble a bit movie posters (for the original and the sequel), although they are designed quiet *understated*. As for the artist they could well be used as slogans. In that way they become both a highly personal as well as a collective desire in times that we would like to leave behind as soon as possible.

(\*) In the happening 'The visitor is / becomes the artist' (Hole Of The Fox, October the 18th. 2013) the space was divided in two by a line: a section 'non-artist' and 'artist'. A visitor who crossed the line became 'artist' and this action became a work of art. Some created a performance, sang a song, or recited a text. Others simply did nothing at all. The performance 'Training day' (Hole Of The Fox, May the 8th 2015) was based on Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. The classic mats were arranged in a checkerboard pattern. The daily training of the sportsmen became the performance.

Ive Stevenheydens is a curator, art critic and writer. He has created projects and exhibitions for ARGOS (Brussels), De Brakke Grond (Amsterdam), Image Forum (Tokyo, Fukuoka, Kyoto, Nagoya and Yokohama), Experimenta (Melbourne) and The Reading Room (Bangkok). Recently he has published about Thomas Demand, Danica Lundy and Kader Attia (*Archined* and *Metropolis M*) as well as in the artist books *Ali Cabbar System Error* and *Emmanuel Van der Auwera: A Certain Amount of Clarity*.