

The House of Art and Beauty. A report from a visit

Dear Friend,

On the 1 September 2019, two artists: Marc Vanrunxt – a choreographer, and Katleen Vinck – a visual artist – invited people to spend time together in the House of Art and Beauty. I was there, and I decided to write a letter to you, to save this experience in the repository of the invisible.

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I'm here: the exact address is Duinstraat 124. Antwerpen-Noord. A cheerful day in late Summer, before school starts. In the still warm and gentle air you can sense a new season approaching, with all its openings, responsibilities and the dust it brings along. I enjoy thinking about this very Sunday as a moment of transition. And I'm open to what is going to happen. Five hours to be spent in the working & living environment of Katleen Vinck, which on this special occasion, will become a house for many guests: artists, their works and witnesses.

Extraordinary gatherings like this are called, at least in the cultural nomenclature, *durational projects*. They are meant to play with time, a sense of permanence, a reflection on being in a – random or deliberately composed – community of people, in order to become attentive and involved. I have always been fond of this idea and I want to let my senses be sharpened and see how time itself reveals its capacity to stretch and shrink. It may provoke new thoughts. I find this precious and rare.

The event is clearly structured: the space is depicted on a map handed out to everybody at the entrance. The names of the artists are listed next to a schedule, and each work presented belongs either to a group of *beeldende kunst* or *performance*. This is the last moment when 'I need to know'. Everything that happens afterwards is about the desire to be lost, about the joy of inhabiting the space and exploring what it contains.

Let me shortly report on how I saw The House of Art and Beauty. I hope you don't mind that in this account everything I'm going to share turns out to be an image. Each project that *took place* here – in a literal sense of the phrase, namely: requesting a slot in time and a space – became for me an item from a collection of postcards, which I deliver to you now, in this very letter. As if I cut it out from the specific universe that I looked at, and then decided how to compose my own assemblage.

What really stroke me was the fact that the proposed formula caused a certain shift, the divisions between the disciplines (and their respective, somehow expected, apparatuses) were blurred. The images (*beeldende kunst*) became events, exposed within limited timeframes. And the events (*performance*), due to a more powerful than usual sense of ephemerality and

being crowded in the schedule, turned into images imparted with a particular materiality, images that left an imprint on memory.

The biggest room: empty, large and exceptionally high, could be a sound stage for a film or a sacral space of grey emptiness, where the light bursting in through the windows of a former power plant brings epiphany. Here we are: people / spectators freely moving across the space, according to the current focus of a performance. There is no stage or fixed viewing point. What matters is an organic flow of bodies driven by attention.

The first occurrence materialises by the time my eyes adjust. It's *Pharmakon*: a long-lasting, 'background' yet persisting action by CMMC Céline Mathieu & Myrthe van der Mark. The scent of essential oils precedes the view of a double installation: two massage beds, on each lies a woman attended to by a person who seems to be a professional masseuse/masseur. This is important: the presumption that what I see is not a performance, but an actual scenery for providing a service. A service that creates a strange ambience – with its sensual oils, beautiful relaxed bodies, and the release of tension, but which also seduces by the composition and pure quality of the image it creates. In this way, the four bodies turn into transmitters and sensors of the energy filling the space, brought in by people – their attention, excitement, tiredness, and maybe some moments of drifting away.

During the afternoon, while the massage continues, it triggers new inter-image associations. For instance, by creating a constellation with the painting by Denitsa Todorova hanging on the wall above the massage scene. Only after some time I realise that its title is *Like a star above you*. All in grayscale, the canvas (or a large sheet of paper, I'm not sure now) resembles a documentation of the sky: twirled lines tracing the trajectories of falling stars, a frantic vortex of clouds and different shades of the twilight zone. Another example: during one of the performing interventions, one of the men giving the massage keeps doing his job with one hand, whilst taking pictures of the performance with another. This kind of loop goes on in the House of Art and Beauty all the time.

A keyword, or better said, a key-state that I observe in the in-between actions is a sense of geometry. In *Fourfold (Autonomous Scenography)* by Meryem Bayram & Guy Rombouts, a large, over-scaled (when compared to the humans involved), or well-sized (when it comes to the capacity of the building) piece of cardboard plays a central role. The weight of abstraction and the precision of the actions contrast with their playfulness. I see a man and a woman who assemble and disassemble spheres with a piece of paper – a real *carte blanche*. It is folded into different origami-like shapes until it forms an envelope in which the man is hiding. As if this arbitrary cardboard surface could bring some decisive divisions into the world and make a person invisible. The strips of cardboard are folded, spiralled into flexible matter to create corridors, corners, waves. Suddenly, in this short etude, the basic rules of mathematics are given their spatial embodiment.

The hyphen is a punctuation mark that joins words or divides them. It creates a bond or a distance between two typographical entities, two chunks of a language. I think about it after

seeing the duo Charlotte Vanden Eynde & Nicolas Rombouts performing under the title *Hyphen*. There are two people in this piece (presented twice in the programme): she – a dancer, he – a double bass player. But I see more actors involved: the intense, beautiful shining body of the instrument, as well as time and space. A geometry of relations, the acoustic responsiveness that they negotiate, or better said, rehearse between them. Vanden Eynde and Rombouts unfold a conversation using their respective languages activated by impulses and applied through dance and music, all connected in a hyphenated relationship. It seems to me that both are coming from different biotopes, but by being bonded, co-dependent, they create a third quality, a new ecosystem which I enjoy visiting.

Accusations, a performance by Ann Van den Broek, with a striking appearance by Frauke Mariën, tears the space apart, not waiting for people to catch their breath or become comfortable within it. It waits with a sense of urgency to begin sharply and intensely. Again: geometry. Very strict and definite. Everything is happening on a small black square equipped with wires, pedals, controllers – complex hardware and software to support and remix Mariën's presence. In the vast open space of the House of Art and Beauty the little stage seems to be a cropped-out zone, radical in its intimacy, very restricted. Mariën's landscape is black: not only the square of the floor, but also the clothes she wears: a black jumpsuit, lacquered high heels, a fringe top. I am witnessing an enhancing sharpness and vulnerability, solitude and eroticism, an ongoing struggle. As if all the black matter was carrying the weight of her problems. It is an emergency of communication. She speaks out using simple sentences reporting her past, present, and perhaps also her future states. I remember one of them in particular: 'I was able' and 'I was unable'. The phrases are recorded and then replayed; the broadcast is blurred with documentation. It makes the sense of time very unclear. *Accusations* has a repetitive structure. It takes place three times over the course of the afternoon, disclosing, showing three reflections in the mirror. It makes the presence of Frauke Mariën a ghostly appearance. She keeps coming back, as if the problem has not yet been solved. And then, suddenly, once she leaves her black square, running across the space, I notice a new composition: a dialogue between her desperate figure and the anti-figurative, a still image by Todorova and the 'massage station'.

The sense of belonging and looking for connection is something that hooks me in the slots, when I happen to lose my focus, or on the contrary, I cling to a detail: a figure, a shape. Like to two women: Bahar Temiz and Daphne Koutsafi, who in a choreography of closeness create a new person that shares something with – all of us, the gathering of viewers. After some time of contemplation, this poetic, hypersensitive exercise of attachment turns into another practice, that of Klaas Freek Devos. In his *Solo for nervous system* he presents an attempt to establish a connection with the inner sphere. I see him isolated from the outside, because of headphones (hard to distinguish from earplugs), but at the same time ultimately exposed, transmitting inner impulses through external movement. I feel unable to get closer, but I'm intrigued to know more. And then, after returning home I learn that what I saw was a sample of a bigger research project, *Barely imaginable beings* which is 'the space wherein practices explore the intimate poetry of knowing and thinking bodies and the aesthetics of

(mis)understandings between them'. Maybe this is an answer to my questions. One detail marks a visual memory of his presence. A piece of silver paper on his nose. A statement?

In his solo *0. THOA&B* Radouan Mriziga redefines the space – in the relationship between the dancing body and the architecture. Moreover, our notion of the territory can change rapidly: geometry is a powerful system. Here Maité Jeannolin divides the zone that she explores by setting angles made out of scotch tape, movement and voice. The floor of the atelier is also explored by seven performers involved in *Prospect <EVA>*. Suddenly everybody needs to lower their line of viewing, to be attentive to what is happening. How do bodies behave while lying down, and how can a choreography be performed with hands only, changing the notion of the horizontal and the vertical? It is a sort of meditation that, in my perception, is intertwined with the soundscape of The House of Art and Beauty as a hidden companion. The ambience of people entering and leaving the space. A diluted noise coming from the bar and the silence of the choreography seep into each other but also into a spoken discourse produced by the ongoing presentations; for instance, a solo by Koen De Preter or a work in progress by a young anarchistic duo Siska Baek & Maya Callaert.

All the performing interventions filter into each other, emerging fluently from the space that is, at all times, a partner, a supporter that lends its light, capacity and air. It is important to note that during its entire duration, the House of Art and Beauty uses no artificial light. So that the time slot: 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. performs its own show, sharing the engagement during the chosen time of the afternoon – with brightness and energy, and then with fading away. The space lives and breathes. This becomes clear, especially during the performances that take place more than once. For instance, I perceive the second appearance of De Preter differently. It happens later when the light is deeper, heavier. It seems that it also affects his voice, which spreads among new invisible air corridors.

Whilst I'm dazed by all the live events and wander around as if in a trance, *beeldende kunst* waits patiently. I find a lot of pleasure in exploring the peripheries, the rooms adhering to the main hall. They deserve special attention. Now, for the sake of this letter to you, dear Friend, I indulge in an experiment. I imagine that I could spend these hours only with the framed images: paintings, videos, installations, sculptures, prints. How would this change my visit?

Again, I seek a connection, a relationship with the images. Like in the earth coloured *Bodyprints* by Joris van Oosterwijk, resembling posthumous images of someone's presence. Or in the open, very messy atelier of Tom Volkaert, full of oddities, straggly twisted sculptures in which I see something between plasticine and synthetic flesh. I stand in front of *Legendary Land* by Katleen Vinck. This sculpture is displayed on a concrete, tangible catafalque, which could also be a ceremonial altar or an artist's worktable. I see another de-shaped body, the remains of a being, which is as material (almost mineral) as a sacral aura. In the background, there is a big white board with half of a silver circle. I wonder: Is this a setting sun of the *Legendary Land*?

At times, the visual works of the House of Art and Beauty are like silent companions, especially if located in the main room. This is the case of the already mentioned image by Todorova, or a small yellow painting by Narcisse Tordoir *One for me – One for you*, a pictogram of a piece of bread and a knife. It is so yellow and so contrasting with the grey brick wall that it seems to be an additional source of light. There is also another witness of the day. Round and oval objects – fingers and eyes – made by Stef Van Looveren in *Mommy I Love You But I Am Not Your Son*. These are over-scaled, childish, deliberately artificial, in the colours of hard candies – pale pink, greenish, blue. They look as if somebody threw them there, in the corner of the room. The eyes are animated through the colourful electronic stream of images displayed from the inside. I see moving collages, constellations of patterns that are a bit psychedelic. Since the electronic eyes shine there all the time (together with dismembered parts of hands) they play an ambiguous role – belonging to the gathering of the spectators, but on other terms. As if they registered the images appearing through the day and processed them with their own visual, full-colour software.

Another collage, this time a very flat, two-dimensional one, is located on the opposite side of the room. *A Flat Scenario* by Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven. Whenever I encounter a work by this artist, I'm touched by a sense of exhaustion, of intensity. By her poetics of documenting life – with its affections, clashing desires and disappointments, the banality of all struggles. Often, Van Kerckhoven uses very intense, almost 'screaming' colours (like in the video *The Jakarta Two Times* presented in the basement of the House). Here they are a bit faded. But there is a script, a score to structure of *The Flat in Belgium* (which is a caption dominating the visual field), limited by the edges of an image. The score contains some rules printed out in white, which are not that flexible: '- One major character, - structure the drama, - the character is unchanging, - constant and enduring, - you cannot change the essence of the character'. This work is like a composition of random daily images cropped out of magazines or advertising leaflets. It's a report on life.

The House of Art and Beauty also pulls me to the underground level, where I'm captivated by *Virtual Embalming*, a short video by Frederik Heyman, starring three female icons: Isabelle Huppert, Kim Peers and Michèle Lamy. I see their fantasies of a future life after death. All three are very different. The women share with us their vision of beauty, love, desire, a space and way to be remembered. Huppert envisages herself in a realm full of wildflowers, Peers in an abandoned Asian hotel room, in bondage, and Lamy in empty quarters of Abud Dabi and the Gobi Desert. The characters, the sceneries, interiors, details are designed (produced) digitally, by using photogrammetry: 3D scans. Heyman – fascinated by the technique of embalming bodies, popular in Puerto Rico, where the deceased play the role of central guests at funeral ceremonies, surrounded by setting designed to represent the life of the departed – declares that he wants to create 'frozen moments in time'. What strikes me here is the vastness and intimacy of an inner landscape that turns into something almost theatrical. How would my last landscape be decorated? How would it be designed? Are there any rules to this speculation? Could this also be my own ultimate house of art and beauty?

The House of Art and Beauty is carefully composed, filled with existing images and future views. This is also the case of the quietest, and in my perception, the most monochromatic room. It is a space of light, the subtle graphic work by Paul Verrept (*Landschappen*) and flyers with the visual layout of the event, designed by Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx, exhibited on a big table. I can see different variations of the flyer in its polymorphic stages. You could ignore it. It's a rare strategy to acknowledge a leaflet as a work of art, but here – in the house – the notion of the representation gains added weight. The field resonates. In another neighbouring corner, I find *Monterey* by Robert Cash. This painting also carries a notion of landscape. Multiplied circles are traces of light. The outflows create a shape of a tree, or, once I look again, another view: a cloud of air blown out from mouths.

While leaving the house, suddenly emptied of people, noise and action, I ask myself: what does it mean: 'the House of Art and Beauty'? The two words 'art' and 'beauty' coupled in one sentence don't belong to the vocabulary of art events. As if they provoke too many doubts and questions and could never be light, affirmative or free from a historical and critical legacy. Maybe the best comment to this is a video located next to the entrance to the main room. It is a work by Annea Lyvv Dreisz, *How to open an art gallery n°2* in which an unidentified person, covered in a goldish-white veil, enters a gallery space from a street. The person's route is a *rite de passage*. S/he (wearing also a furry hat-mask, so that the face is not visible) explores the gallery space, dances among the paintings. A promise of transformation through art? At least an opening. A guardian of the House of Art and Beauty who has left their respective trace.

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Now, after writing to you about my visit in the house, I realize that it was an experience of *flâneuring*: wandering around, being visible and invisible at the same time, walking and sitting, investigating things that appear for a moment, knowing that soon they may transform into another state. It made me reach out to *The Arcades Project* again and think why it is so important to report this event, what it is all about. Is it about care? Friendship? Being less lonesome with this memory?

Let me share with you a quote, borrowed by Walter Benjamin from Jules Romains:

According to my idea, it's always rather in that way that you make friends with anybody. You are present together at a moment in the life of the world, perhaps in the presence of a fleeting secret of the world – an apparition which nobody has ever seen before and perhaps nobody will ever see again. It may even be something very little. Take two men going for a walk, for example, like us. Suddenly, thanks to a break in the clouds, a ray of light comes and strikes the top of a wall; and the top of the wall becomes, for the moment, something in some way quite extraordinary. One of the two men touches the other on the shoulder. The other raises his head and sees it too, understands it too. Then the thing up there vanishes. But they will know in *aeternum* that it once existed.

Jules Romain, *Les Hommes de bonne volante*, book 2, *Crime de Oginette* <Paris, 1932>, pp. 175-176:15 [MIS,I]¹

This is my ending image for you.

Yours,

Kasia

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcade Project*, translated by Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2002.