

JOS DE GRUYTER  
& HARALD THYS

O P T I M U N D U S

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Vi sfonderemo tutti i buchi. Lo faremo fin quando resterà un solo grande buco.  
Quel buco che puzza dei vostri morti, vi sfonderemo pure quello.  
E quando tutto sarà sfondato, ricominceremo di nuovo.  
Noi siamo così, siamo così, siamo così.—Anonymous, Bari, Italy, 1709



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# DOUBLED VISION

## Mapping the Parallel Worlds of Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys

JENNIFER KRASINSKI

We are going to demonstrate the existence of parallel worlds ... but also at the same time prove that it is possible to place oneself therein.—Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys, *Parallel Worlds*, 2011

Over the past twenty-odd years, Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys have created a body of thirty-four video works pulsing with gallows humor and possessed by the divided spirit of *collaboration*, their productions being those of artists in consort not only with one another, but also with the dark forces stowed inside their disquieting narratives. Through the looking glass of their doubled vision—which has also produced innumerable photographs, drawings, paintings, sculptures, installations, and performances—worlds parallel to our own appear, insurgent fictions purified of the usual narrative seductions in order to feel at once familiar and foreign. The stories, such as they are, all seem as though they were preceded by some kind of detonation; one question seems to hang over them all: *what happened?* The action stutters along broken arcs populated by dummies, doppelgängers, and other hollowed souls who appear to be post-something: post-trauma, post-language, or even post-human. Their deflated, almost ghostly performance style is so stripped of theatrics, its description could be mistaken for a list of symptoms: unmoving, unspeaking, numb, and perverse. Even the spaces these gutted characters inhabit—whether locations or constructed sets—are so spare and aggressively square that they begin to resemble fallout shelters for what’s left of the living. Moreover, all is filmed in *sheer stupidity*, in transparent veils of formal dumbness behind which the artists hide their sharp critical bite. Mapping these points of de Gruyter & Thys’s parallel worlds requires that we look beyond the surface of things—reject the seductive dupe of appearances—and explore the depths of what lurks beneath.

Their partnership began in 1988 with *Mime in the Videostudio*, made while both were students at the Sint-Lukas Brussels University College of Art and Design. Although the video appears at first to be little more than a display of art-school tomfoolery, it in fact sets the stage for the sly subversions that continue to propel their collaborations, and doubles as a portrait of the young artists as court jesters, armed with a sharp humor to puncture the powers that be. The piece features a gangly, adolescent Thys wearing nothing but a white vest and underwear, monkeying around in the school’s video studio. Over the saccharine sounds of Euro-pop songs, he stiffly marches back and forth, mimes swimming across the stage, and tries to somersault with no luck—a pure vision of goof

over grace. He then awkwardly dances while holding large squares of Styrofoam that once belonged to the ex-priest who was previously in charge of the video studio, and who reputedly stashed his pornography there. If Thys's flailings playfully wag a middle finger at certain fascisms—of the body, of an art education, of acceptable modes of art production—the appearance of the ex-priest's belongings brings to mind the presence of darker, more illicit activities that might also happen in the space where art is made.

The sheer stupidity on display in this early video evolves into a potent strategy with which the artists promote their interrogations. Of course, stupidity wields powerful agency in contemporary culture; the free market's alleged "dumbing down" of cultural production in the name of popularity (or, in the case of American culture, democracy) holds certain levels of intellectual exchange hostage, maligning difficulty and rigor as toxic subversions of these presumed virtues. However, stupidity also alerts us to the spaces where thinking is needed, and carves out room for critical reflection; in fact, stupidity is a condition required for intellectual pursuit. In the case of de Gruyter & Thys, it is the appearance of stupidity—the invocation of stupidity—that functions as a disruptive force within the work, disarming the viewer with comedic affect while reclaiming a space inside the work for the artists' darker inquiries.

In certain videos, this sheer stupidity materializes as genre failure. In work such as *Parallelogram* (2000) and *De Pot* (The Bucket, 2001), the artists corrupt the form of the melodrama, which in turn gives them room to play around with the traditional tropes of violence. Both tales take place inside domestic spaces so claustrophobic and tightly composed that they might be characterized instead as *domesticating* spaces, trapping the players and enforcing codes of behavior otherwise unnatural to them. In the opening shot of *Parallelogram*, we see a man and woman staring at each other; she sits on a couch while he stands in the corner of a drab, colorless room. They remain still and do not speak—in fact, there is no intelligible dialogue in the video whatsoever—implying perhaps that there is nothing left to do or say. In *De Pot*, the characters do speak, but the artists dub their voices in dopey monotones that don't always sync up with their mouths. Sabotaging the actors' abilities to speak for themselves has the disquieting effect of reducing their presence closer to that of puppets, ventriloquist dummies, or—perhaps more to the point—artists' material.

With the human presence reduced to near objecthood, violence can now be explored as a purely formal problem. The home invasion scene in *De Pot* is a series of shots in which the performers hold poses that illustrate rather than enact the killing of our couple; violence, in this case, is hardly more than reference material used to transform what usually would be a tragedy into a farce. To a similar end, the murder that takes place in *Het Spinnewiel* (The Spinning Wheel, 2002) occurs as part of a play that the characters put on; it happens during a story within the story, which leaves the viewer unclear as to the weight of this death. Blunting the usual narrative repercussions and moral resonance of these actions, de Gruyter & Thys tear holes in the seams of their fictions to upend what we—the audience—have come to expect from these images. Their strategy is not unlike Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect, which embraced and illuminated

theatrical artifice in order to emotionally distance the audience from the stories at hand; in other words, the viewers' empathy was always being interrupted with a reminder that what they were watching was a stage play. De Gruyter & Thys's cold constructions continuously assert the artists' presence and return our attention to the representations of violence rather than to violence itself, thereby raising questions regarding the value and virtue of artists and art. They address this subject directly in *Ten Weyngaert* (2007), *Der Schlamm von Branst* (The Clay from Branst, 2008), and *The Frigate* (2008), all of which, like *Mime in the Videostudio*, are humorous but unsettling interrogations of the spaces in which art is made.

*Ten Weyngaert* is loosely based on a community center of the same name in Brussels where de Gruyter worked for years. Although it was founded as a utopian space in which citizens could pursue art as a kind of therapy—as a way to exercise their imagination and creativity—it later devolved into a halfway house for broken eccentrics, depressives, and other lost souls. De Gruyter & Thys's cast enacts a state of catatonia inside the walls of Ten Weyngaert; dead-eyed and dull, they sit or stand and stare dumbly off into space. No one is named except Tim and Tom, a pair of attendants dressed in matching institutional blue jumpsuits who bully the residents. No one speaks; the only voice we hear is a voice-over recounting a story about a man who squeezes mice for sexual pleasure, a perversion assumed to be the result of a mouse-related trauma from his youth. The video cuts between the silent community room and a dark theatrical space where the residents are putting on a play of unknown origin (or plot) that features magicians, a scarecrow, a man in black face and another in yellow face, and other assorted characters. As one might suspect, little healing happens at Ten Weyngaert; in fact, the residents only seem to slide into greater depths of despair. Having a last laugh, de Gruyter & Thys offer their characters a final means to truly free themselves: not by making art, but by jumping out a window.

*Der Schlamm von Branst* places its catatonics not in a community center but in an art studio, where all are at work on a series of pathetic clay sculptures. Again, de Gruyter & Thys tell their story in a series of shots where everyone is posed, yet nothing is perfect; in fact, the only movement we see happens over the clay. Two men (another identical pair) awkwardly use sharp sticks to drill holes into the backs, legs, and heads of sculpted figures; another man attempts to put the finishing touches on a horse head that looks laughably like a drooping phallus, while still another works on a portrait bust that resembles an erect one. It seems the drive to make art is sexual, though it's hardly seductive; all this drilling doesn't appear satisfying or thrilling—nor is it producing artworks of obvious mastery, or rewarding us with the pleasures of looking. If the dark joke at the core of *Der Schlamm von Branst* is that the art object—or more specifically, the bad art object—is the product of the perverse and pathetic, then *The Frigate* reverses this punch line so that the art object is what elicits a pathetic perversity from people. The story opens on a cameraman behind a bush videotaping something unseen. From there, we watch dark, psychosexual antics unfold between a group of men and a lone woman, all propelled into deviance by the presence of a

painted black model of a frigate. Once again, no one speaks, and the action is played out solely in poses, producing one of the most disturbing sequences in their videos to date: a series of shots in which the group, fully clothed and wholly chaste, holds positions that echo a porn-movie gang bang. Divested of the sex and violence that would usually rouse an audience, the scene points to the presence of a different type of degeneracy: perhaps imitation is the ultimate perversion?

Any meditation on imitation and perversity must extend also to the recurrence of twins, or doppelgängers, throughout de Gruyter & Thys's videos. In nearly all of their narratives, identical or near-identical pairs pop up, usually as nefarious presences: the crow-masked thugs in *De Pot*, the bearded henchmen in *Parallelogram*, the homicidal twins in *Het Spinnewiel*, the sad-sack sculptors in *Der Schlamm von Branst*, as well as the attendants Tim and Tom in *Ten Weyngaert*, to name a few. These characters, likely stand-ins for the artists, are also collaborators, always working in cahoots with one another to sculpt, protect, murder, or bully. As self-portraits, we understand that the artists believe themselves to be twinned, or at least functioning most effectively (and subversively) when together. We may also read them as facets of the artists' personalities and cultural positions, or manifesting anxieties about a lack of autonomy, about reiteration, or the potential collapse of two into an indistinguishable entity. In *Het Geel van Gent* (The Yellow of Ghent, 2005), de Gruyter & Thys appear as themselves, twinning each other by wearing identical robes and socks, neither distinguishing himself particularly from the other. To complicate (and lighten) matters, the voices of the artists are provided as a voice-over by Thys's father, Walter; the joke is of course that father and son also represent a kind of doubling. A son is a reiteration of the father who, in this case, literally speaks for his son, though only in the words his son has given him—a closed psychological circuit that is, in the context of the video, impossible to break out of.

Doubling is not simply a matter of character: it is a contingency of the parallel worlds envisioned by de Gruyter & Thys. To complicate the distinction between reality and their fictions, they have taken to installing the “prop art” from their videos inside their exhibitions. Although it is not unusual for artists to display production design as art, when “fictional artwork” appears in a gallery (fictional art displayed as real art made by real artists on behalf of fictional ones) its presence causes funny ruptures between the art world and the worlds of their art. For example, we assume that the clay sculptures featured in *Der Schlamm von Branst* were made by de Gruyter & Thys, even though in the video, the clay portrait busts are the products of a group of slack-jawed dummies. In fact, they were commissioned by the artists from Francisca Lambrechts, who made them from found photos of work from beginner clay workshops. Walking among these works in the exhibition space has the effect of having fallen down a rabbit hole, where we find ourselves inside the reality of the artists' fictional worlds, in the overlapping space between the real and the parallel worlds of their art. This effect is not at all lost on de Gruyter & Thys, who aim to immerse their viewers in an experience, which renders us participants in the stories we believed we had only been watching.

Their 2010 video *Das Loch* (The Hole) marks a grand shift in their thinking and working process, and can be read as the key that once and for all unlocks the doors between real and parallel worlds. For this story, the artists replaced their usual cast with sloppily constructed mannequins that make no attempt at being “lifelike” or performing as stand-ins for humans; de Gruyter & Thys finally used real dummies instead of the fake ones they’d hired for years. Made of Styrofoam heads with thumbtacks for eyes, then clothed, accessorized, and hung on metal frames, the mannequins (unlike their human predecessors) can speak and converse with one another, their voices dubbed and synthesized to sound nearly robotic. The video tells the stories of two characters: Fritz, a sadistic and immoral video artist whose life is filled with success and pleasure; and Johannes, a melancholy painter whose sensitive soul is crushed when his wife—his great love—tells him that his work is worthless, and suggests that he too make videos. Suicidal, Johannes begs death to relieve him of the emptiness of living and return him to God. When *Das Loch* was screened as part of the exhibition “Im Reich der Sonnenfinsternis” (In the Realm of the Eclipse, 2011/12) at Isabella Bortolozzi Galerie in Berlin, it was projected alongside 120 of Johannes’s paintings; when it was exhibited at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein in 2011, de Gruyter & Thys lay the mannequin of Johannes in a vitrine resembling a glass coffin. Although the gesture is humorous, its implications are far-reaching—the mysterious twin characters, speaking for the artists themselves, tell Johannes in the final moments of the video:

We will break into all of your holes. We will do so until only one big hole remains. The black hole that smells of your death, we will break into that too. And when everything is broken into, we will start all over again. We are like that, we are like that.

In their most recent work, the artists have continued to manifest the worlds of their doubled vision, and although we may walk among the artifacts of their fictions to see beneath the surfaces of what they appear to be, de Gruyter & Thys haven’t revealed all of the mysteries of their art to us. *Les énigmes de Saarlouis* (The Riddles of Saarlouis, 2012) is a video that features two mannequins dressed in schoolmarm garb; both wear half-glasses perched at the end of their Styrofoam noses, and shabby wigs on their heads. They speak in tandem, their voices synthesized, produced by doubling a single woman’s voice. For the length of the video, the mannequins perform as sphinxes, asking us logic puzzles to which we never learn the answer. “A man drives his car while listening to the radio,” they say. “Suddenly the music stops and the man commits suicide. Why?” Another one: “A lady died on a bridge in the countryside during a starry night. A fool is about to cross the bridge. How did the lady die?” Of course, even if we knew the answers, we can’t talk back to a video. We’ll never be able to pass through the screen to know what lies beyond these guardians; de Gruyter & Thys have left it to us to imagine for ourselves what might be there.

Parts of this essay originally appeared in “All Is Disquiet: Portrait of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys,” *Spike Art Quarterly*, no. 28 (Summer 2011): 62–71.

# THE SUB-NASAL LOVE WAND

## Facial Hair in the Work of Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys

NAV HAQ

It's the month of November as I write this—or, as it now seems to be increasingly referred to across the globe, “Movember.” For thirty days males everywhere are permitted the audacity to suspend their preexisting notions of taste and decency, modify their regular grooming routines of shaving or trimming, and sport a moustache without fear of judgment or prejudice, albeit in the name of supporting prostate and testicular cancer charities. Beyond the ironic camp humor and the jokes about looking dandy-esque (or worse, like your father in his wedding photographs), many, for this limited time at least, secretly enjoy having a hairy upper lip, and often give their new facial furniture inventively ridiculous names—the sub-nasal love wand, cookie duster, or womb broom, to name just a few recently overheard monikers. Men do often feel that they have a mysterious relationship to their facial hair, to the point that it maybe even takes on some particular significance.

The biased expectation in the West that women endure the preening, tweezing, shaving, chemical extraction, lasering, plucking, and waxing first came about arguably as a result of the media imagery that emerged in the United States and Britain only around a century ago. Masculine hirsutism, in contrast, has more or less remained over time a visible and hormonal secondary sex characteristic. Furthermore, our beards, moustaches, sideburns, and even unibrows possess a myriad of cultural significance. Facial hair is typically seen as one of the primary signifiers of the alpha male—historically also symbolizing the possession of wisdom and virility, as well as devout religiosity, as in the three main Abrahamic faiths, Sikhism, and Rastafarianism. Facial hair can also be both a means and a metaphor for disguise, like how the term “beard” is colloquially used to describe the wife of a gay man who's hiding his sexuality. But whether facial hair is allowed to grow through choice or chance, it can be highly emblematic of where one sits on the spectrum of masculine ego.

While combing through this subject's gender implications, it's worth mentioning that there are examples of women possessing forms of facial hair, also in the art historical context. In particular there are two who happen to have come to tragic ends. Ana Mendieta famously adorned herself with, in different instances, a handlebar moustache and a beard for her series *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)* (1972). Her moustache still ranks as one of art history's best; her action, though, was rather intended to consider the gender binaries created by society. And of course in the case of Frida Kahlo and her series of self-portraits, a distinctive unibrow crowns her

face. Her compositions also often include our hairy simian cousins from the monkey kingdom—symbols of lust in Mexican mythology—that in turn represent the desires women repress due to their incompatibility with certain male expectations.

The hirsute male of the species is key to pursuing the curious tendency of Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys to create furry facial embellishments in their art. A recurring motif in many of their videos and sculptures is the inclusion of numerous hairstyles on the heads and faces of the predominantly male characters they create. The artists themselves are no strangers to facial fur, themselves occasionally proffering various degrees of bushiness on their chins, as seen in the one and only video they appear in together, *Het Geel van Gent* (The Yellow of Ghent, 2005). The hairy appendages in this video serve to heighten the sense of fatigue and dilapidation the two characters embody. Having sealed themselves within the mundane confines of a hotel in the Flemish city of Ghent (which is in actual fact the bedroom of Thys's mother), they appear, almost puppet-like, miming a conversation that is actually a recording of the voice of Thys's father. Drained of the will to even consider grooming or getting dressed, de Gruyter stares at himself in the mirror while Thys lies on the bed, glaring at the ceiling. The anesthetic combination of facial hair and persistent staring also recurs in many of their mannequin sculptures. Many of these characters resemble each other and recall lost or castaway characters, both physically and mentally, in the Western literary canon, such as Robinson Crusoe or the Count of Monte Cristo.

Very few women characters appear in their works, bar the occasional appearances by Thys's sister Marianne or more recent mannequin characters, such as Hildegard in the video *Das Loch* (The Hole, 2010) and the riddling duo Kitty & Katty from the video *Les énigmes de Saarlouis* (The Riddles of Saarlouis, 2012). On the other hand, the hair on the faces of the males is unavoidable and consistently possesses the same curiously statuesque characteristic: it simply never moves, always appearing solid, sculpted, like an object; always looking like a contrivance, perhaps stuck on by the characters themselves at the same unfortunate moment each day. But in its own way, this hair, metaphorically speaking, is something for us to latch onto when considering the portrayal of the male subject in their work—related to themes of power relations, the social veil people adopt as part of their public personae, and maybe even the bleakness at the heart of the European social imaginary. It's also what gives their work much of its weirdness.

Thys's brother Erik often appears in their video works, regularly taking on the role of the domineering man. His look is always stark and expressive, his eyebrows impressive. His beard is equally menacing. In *De Vloek* (The Curse, 1999) he adopts the persona of the abusive husband following the birth of a son, displaying his physical demonstrations of fury within the confines of the domestic space. In *The Frigate* (2008), a video without any real spoken dialogue, all communication operates on a preverbal level in a space that also contains a black model of a ship. A Freudian symbol of female sexuality (à la Kahlo's monkeys), the ship causes the characters—a woman and a group of men—to behave in tense acts of gendered aberration. The

whole time, the beard of Erik's character, though disheveled, again never moves. The big brown thicket of hair, contrasting with his shining, menacing bald head, heightens the sense of his social deprivation. In Thys's video *The Victim* (1992) his brother is a hit man, driving around with an accomplice and an anonymous victim of their violent acts in the trunk of their car. The retro-gangster muttonchops on this fiend are simply a crime in themselves.

With their recent transition from video works with living people to video works with mannequins, the artificial facial hair maintains its prominent role. The video and related constellation of installations for *Das Loch* is the key example here. In it, two German artist friends have an unspoken rivalry. There is Fritz, the trendy macho baldy who makes video art. His bright-red Styrofoam head is adorned with a pair of jet-black shades and a matching black Van Dyck moustache and beard—a sleek, neatly groomed set of face frills. His art-scene friend Johannes is a more fragile figure, bearing John Lennon glasses along with a belief in the universal expression of abstract painting, yet suffering from a deep sense of existential angst. There is only one female character here, Johannes's girlfriend Hildegard, who conforms to one of the classic cinematic female stereotypes, acting as the linchpin that allows her male lover's emotions to flow freely. Johannes's scruffy aged beard, just like his life, is left to the wrath of chance, life, and the elements. In the installation related to this work, with the actual mannequin of Johannes lying in a coffin-like vitrine, we understand that he has, perhaps unsurprisingly, committed suicide. These simple, folksy, homespun figures possess little in the way of features, especially facial ones—merely objects stuck or perched on top of the mannequin's torso. Johannes's beard has been applied in loose gestures, just like the strokes of his abstract paintings; clearly Johannes never liked to use a brush on himself, rather preferring the type used to make painterly gestures on a canvas. Ultimately, the "choice" of Fritz's trendy tufts stands in stark contrast to the "chance" of Johannes's fuzzy beard, direct signs of their levels of status anxiety and perhaps even the roles their art, as a professional resolve, plays in it.

One obvious physical attribute that separates humans from our ape relatives is the visibility of our skin, an evolutionary cast-off. De Gruyter & Thys nod to our primate relatives in two other works. Firstly, the video *Het Beest* (The Beast, 2000), in which Wiwi, a furry humanoid beast, is brought out of the back room of a bar, where two children sit idly on barstools chatting with the bartender. In the next scene, the beast is put in a corner of another room and the three humans throw white balls at it. Wiwi is victimized for being a hairy beast. The video ends back in the bar, presumably after some sort of reconciliation, with the beast sitting between the two young boys at the counter, all indulging in numerous cans of Coca-Cola. In their performance *The 48 hours of Kwik and Kwak* (2004), first presented at the project space *Établissement d'en face* projects in Brussels, the artists themselves dressed as woolly beasts, once again appearing sort of sexless. They loitered in the gallery space, the floor covered with straw, a car tire suspended from the ceiling like in a monkey enclosure at the zoo. For the two days of the performance they could be

viewed through the windows, cohabiting the space in their fetching orange and green overalls, occasionally being fed meals like animals in a menagerie. Their large woolly heads and bodies resembled nostalgia-tinged characters from '80s television, such as Cookie Monster from *Sesame Street* in the United States or the Honey Monster from advertisements for the breakfast cereal Sugar Puffs in the UK. They are the type of characters stereotyped for their buffoonery, in part because of their cartoon shagginess. Once again, like much of the artists' practice, the actions of Kwik and Kwak operate on a preverbal level—while much of our own communication actually exists on this level, being unshorn gives the misleading impression of being of a primitive order.

There are countless male characters throughout history and culture that are identifiable by their facial appendages, from iconographic and mythical figures like God, Father Christmas, and Jesus, in his typical Europeanized form; through political legends like Abraham Lincoln with his chin curtain or Che Guevara and his patchy crop; to the more infamous folk, like Adolf Hitler and his toothbrush moustache or Osama bin Laden, who apparently dyed his beard black using Just for Men; while not forgetting, of course, the grandiose whisk broom of Belgium's King Leopold II. Whether embodying "good" or "evil" (to use the common ideological poles used in the twin fantasy realms that are Hollywood and politics), it seems a facial accessory has always been a desirable look. But hair, or the lack of it, can also be an indicator of hate crimes, victimhood, or affect too—such as with the seven tons of hair of Holocaust victims that was found at Auschwitz, alleged to be used for stuffing mattresses, or the curious recent incidents of sacrilegious beard-cutting attacks within the US Amish community. Another of the artists' video experiments, one that has rarely been exhibited, is titled *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 2009) after the Nazi-era German propaganda film and provides the situation of an unwilling victim. It's set in a mundane office waiting area or corridor. A mannequin sits, waiting, its entire white head, mouth included, covered in a freak growth of patchy black facial hair that matches the darkness of the frozen pupils of its eyes. Sitting motionless for the most part, this sexless, grotesque creature looks like the disturbing result of an experiment gone wrong.

These are just a few examples of facial hair specimens in de Gruyter & Thys's works. There is also, for instance, the otherworldly yellow-faced man with the Ming the Merciless beard in *Ten Weyngaert* (2007) whom I haven't even begun to untangle. But together, these characters would make up a remarkable rogue's gallery. Just imagine the work of these artists without all the hairy faces—they would be much less outlandish, and each persona would somehow be much more opaque. Each character's facial hair appears symptomatic of a certain situation or trait—sometimes a kind of statement of self-confidence, and for others they signalize a loss of self-control. This is de Gruyter & Thys's way of approaching the condition of the male subject, which is also emblematic of the layer that underlies their practice—that of the affective relations between the inner and outer worlds.

But for those of my fellow gentlemen out there that would wish to consider cultivating a statement facial appendage, approach the follicular challenge ahead with clear eyes and a full heart. I'm sorry to say that like your teenage years, the in-between stage will most probably be awkward and marked by a distinct lack of interest from any potential love interests. However, good things are worth fighting for, and there may be nothing better than a fully realized whiskery.

# NEVER ODD OR EVEN

MICHAEL VAN DEN ABEELE

## I.

By the time people were finally capable of leaving Earth and setting course for outer space, they started to back out, shifting their attention from the heavenly bodies to their own. This was the great paradox of the twentieth century. The attention of the ancient Greeks, the Pharaohs, and even the Aztecs was directed outward, toward the sun, the moon, and the stars. Even in Galileo's time, physics, astrology, and above all mathematics held less mystery for men than one's own body. All the great civilizations were built looking outward, calculating the courses and the masses of bodies bigger than that of the individual. By pure calculation and observation of the sky, the Greeks drew their first maps, which became the starting point for what many centuries later came to be known as "globalization." But they couldn't guess that the collateral damage of globalization would be an inverted obsession with the self.

The development of medical biology and psychology at the end of the nineteenth century propelled people toward the discovery of the human body on the one hand and what they would call the "self" on the other. Psychology and biology became the big new focal points; the twentieth century would become the age of biopolitics. A few decades after the first giant leap for mankind on the moon, people started uttering things like "Why fly to the moon when people are still dying of hunger and we haven't found a cure for AIDS and cancer?"

By the end of the twentieth century people felt they were entitled to importance: "everyone is special," went the saying. The seed of this idea had been planted at the start of the century through a whole range of novels and moving pictures categorized as "utopian satire." These stories apparently expressed in various degrees the primal fear of being "reduced to just a number," and being reduced to just a number was considered a threat to individual expression.

By the end of the century, numbers were mocked and publicly ridiculed. Various media, for example, highlighted a number every day by simply describing it in the most reductive way possible.

Number of the day: 50,000 families traded their license plate for a lifelong public transport pass in 2009; 20 ringgit was the fine Malaysian citizens had to pay for not observing Ramadan; 14 bodies of African refugees were found on a Tuesday morning on the shore of Lampedusa; 26 was the age of China's richest citizen according to *Forbes* magazine; and so on, and so on.

The long and short of it is that there were consequences to all this: fear of the individual being reduced to a number ultimately led to numbers being reduced to individuals. And so, by the first half of the twenty-first century, the numbers

collectively decided that they were no longer to be counted on, and they organized the Great Exodus.

From now on people would have to navigate through space and time by means of “a little more” or “a little less,” right or left, earlier or later, warm or cold. True, the seasons were no longer distinguishable, but people still had night and day to function as a binary thread through their lives. Some, like detectives, desperately started to look for the missing numbers. But to no avail—at the end of every search they would only find themselves. They told each other the stories of these circular quests, over and over. In the meantime, the numbers decided on living the utopia that the people had forsaken by clenching onto their dystopian fear.

The exodus of the numbers brought them to an isolated but large and generous oasis in the middle of the Sahara. Here they would live the great uncalculated life, embracing decadence without decay.

## II.

“I say, the great shift in horror came with the moving pictures’ 1931 adaption of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, written as a book in 1818.”

In the coolness of the common house, a group of numbers had gathered for their monthly book club. They leisurely sat on the many colorful cushions scattered all around. There was no music, but the trickling of a fountain rippled the occasional surface of silence. The common house was basically not much more than a floor and a ceiling carried by numerous square columns. The entire surface of the building and columns was covered with white ceramic tiles, except for a sparse mosaic of glass bricks in the middle of the ceiling: it read *DICITUR CREDITUR*, the motto of the club.<sup>1</sup> Inside the common house the air was always cool due to a natural air-conditioning system, which consisted of white linen curtains hanging from the ceiling, loosely shrouding the entire building. The bottom of the linen cloth fell into a water-filled ditch that ran around the floor of the whole house. When the warm desert wind blew through the water-soaked cloth, a refreshing breeze filled the air. The many plants hanging from the ceiling rarely needed watering.

The book club was not a highly frequented meeting, hence the numbers participating enjoyed the feeling that it was, if not exclusive, a somewhat eccentric

<sup>1</sup> The book club’s motto, *Dicitur creditur* (It is said; it is believed), has often been a cesspool of interpretation. The discussion was mainly about how to value the two words and whether “the person talking” and “the person believing” are one and the same. Some read the device as a balance of the active and the passive; the producing and the consuming; distance and immersion.

But then, a member stumbled upon a much older and exhaustive version of their cherished motto; a mother-version, so to speak: *Saris est aliquid dici ut credatur* (It suffices that something is said for it to be believed). The club members agreed that their own abbreviated *dicitur creditur* sounded less subtle than its original, but it was more dapper, so they kept things as they were. The original did offer a welcome clarification to their motto, as it relieved it a bit of the interpersonal value. It was now definitely about the potential (or even the potency) of the word, and many of the book-club members considered the act of speaking as the act of controlling. Apart from that, they also agreed on the fact that the motto was an open format.

thing to attend, and took it as a welcome occasion to dress up and make a dapper impression.

Twenty-Two wore a slim tailored suit vest with a dazzling print: from the shoulders to the chest it depicted a deep-blue Arabian night descending upon a ocher fairytale landscape around the waist. A pair of pearly dark-blue trousers repeated the hues of the night shoulders. He was barefoot.

He had a paper copy of the book on this occasion, but Twenty-Two was mainly an e-reading lit-mixer. Even with paper versions he couldn't resist scrambling his reading routine, cross-weaving three novels and a couple of essays. But with e-reading he would let the devils run amok. All the same, he had a distinct respect and sometimes a jealous interest in those who would read a single book at a time.

"You see, Shelley's book," continued Twenty-Nine, "hardly contains a visual description of the monster: the horror of the book does not lie in its hideous appearance. But what is more stunning is the fact that in the book version, Frankenstein's monster is highly skilled verbally; one of the best parts of the book—in my opinion—is without a doubt the long dialogue between the monster and its maker, which takes place in a Swiss mountain cavern, where the monster develops a whole philosophical discourse on humanity while threatening to kill Frankenstein if he doesn't make him a female companion. But in the movie version, which set the standard for all other horror movies, everything was inverted: the atrocity of the monster's appearance—an impressive performance by Boris Karloff—became the central focus of the whole story. The face of the monster, with its enlarged forehead, the bolts and seams—it became an instant icon. And as if that wasn't enough, the monster's oratorical capacities disappeared into thin air, only to make him a grunting and mumbling idiot. In the book the monster was a conscious being, a fair and reasonable creature that set his limits and understood the consequences. In the movie version, on the other hand, he's an irresponsible child with no more reasoning than an animal. His gross appearance is the reason why he's a monster, whereas in the book he's a monster because people simply don't give him a name. He lives in the name of the father: the monster of Frankenstein." There was silence.

"I don't know," said One Hundred Sixteen. A design conservative, he was dressed in classy black with a zero margin of error. "Maybe I just don't like horror. Horror merely hides normality; or should I say, horror *betrays* normality, whereas it is normality that betrays horror. And I think cinema merely accelerated the exposure of this. Just look at those Tim Burton movies at the start of the twenty-first century. They're a perfect symptom of a Fritzl and Dutroux era: normality hiding monstrosity."

The words were answered by a many-voiced mumbling that seemed to approve the opinion of One Hundred Sixteen. Twenty-Two waited a while before interrupting the chatter of the numbers. Then he directed his attention to a number that had been sitting silent all the while. "What do you think, Thirty-Eight?"

Thirty-Eight was her own majestic self; her upper body was wrapped in a sculptural crossover top of thin leather, molded through multiple folding. It was

completed with something that appeared as drop-crotch trousers of shiny deep-turquoise silk. Thirty-Eight seldom voiced her opinion through words; instead, she had the habit of shifting and rearranging the folds of her clothes to express her mood. It was a custom from an ancient Native American tribe that she had appropriated.

Cautiously, Thirty-Eight rose, not taking her eyes from Twenty-Two. She shifted the tissue, which until now had appeared as a pantaloon but turned out to be more of a dress. With a swift movement she unveiled her loins, exposing her sex candidly. A little startled by this sudden disclosure, the numbers first blushed then laughed and smiled warmheartedly, enjoying the sight of Thirty-Eight's golden-brown labia, peeking from under curly pubes.

"Ah, well yes, of course," said Twenty-Two. "As yet, we haven't touched upon the subject of Frankenstein's impotence ... It's true that one of the subtexts of Shelley's novel concerns human male frustration. Maybe we can discuss this later on."

Thirty-Eight smiled, folded back the wrapping of her dress and sat down again, her eyes still hooked onto those of the book club's host.

"Tick tock, tick tock—sorry for interruptin' the bookworm bitchin', but I got an announcement to make."

It was Twenty-Four-Seven, whom none of the other numbers had heard enter. He was as smooth in his talking as he was in his moves, which made him seem to float across the ground. Wearing a long, full lemon-yellow dress, he strode across the room encompassing the small group. He was a class-act entrepreneur-slash-pimp who hosted the WatchWatch on a regular but totally random basis, and WatchWatch evenings were never announced earlier than the day of the event. It was a guaranteed full house.

"So I guess y'all know what time it is when you see me. That's riiight: tonight's the night for a brand new WatchWatch and there's gonna be some tickin' and tockin' and a whole lotta clockin'. So don't miss countdown—see you all tonight at the Lucifer Lodge." And in one swift movement Twenty-Four-Seven had left the building.

### III.

The Lucifer Lodge, which was the building that hosted the WatchWatch, could be summarized as an enlarged and simplified matchstick cathedral built out of giant yellow marble matchsticks; though architecturally speaking it was organized more as a temple or arena, with a central floor serving as a stage surrounded by a tribune. Due to the monochrome Jaisalmer marble, the Lucifer Lodge was drenched in a saturated yellow hue, and once the eyes had adjusted, or rather the brain had compensated, everything—except for the yellow surroundings—appeared a colorless ash gray. It created a startling effect of flatness at first and then troublesome depth once the eyes got used to it. The air was waxen with the fumes of incense candles. In intervals, artificial smoke was sent into the main hall to smooth out the rhythmic effect of the matchstick pillars. It looked like cold hell.

Shortly after the doors had opened, the place was already packed. The background music was very rhythmical—somehow freely improvised and tribally inspired, but the rhythms alternately slowed down and sped up again in a very fluid way, like waves.

A WatchWatch was to be taken very literally: watching a watch. On this occasion, the WatchWatch featured humans—with their tiny bodies, humans were easy to mold, if you were careful enough. It wasn't the first time the WatchWatch had people on display, but normally they were shaped into their own historical reenactments. On this night though the watching part was not so much a reenactment of history but of media: it displayed a classic candid-camera routine from around the turn of the century. At the base of a cubic metal frame, the size of a small house, a fake elevator cabin was presented. The cabin had two-way-mirror windows, so that one could look from the outside inside but not the other way around. Above the elevator cabin and twice its size, a giant clock dial was suspended. Time in all its magnitude could be read from wherever the numbers were seated. The metal frame was topped with a 72-bell carillon, the cup-shaped bells organized in a pyramidal shape.

The candid-camera routine was the following: the unsuspecting victim of the joke enters the elevator. A piston-driven shudder gives the victim the feeling that the elevator is going up. All this is accompanied by a recording of the conspiring sniggers and chuckles of an invisible audience. Then all of a sudden the light in the cabin starts to flicker and goes out; the victim doesn't know what's happening. Quickly a young girl in a sleeping gown enters the elevator cabin through a hidden hatchway—this can be seen by the spectators but not by the victim. When the light goes on again the spooky girl stands in the middle of the elevator and scares the living hell out of the victim, who thinks he's seeing a ghost. The frightened screams of the victim are answered by the even louder laughter of the absent audience. The whole routine is repeated over and over again.

The quaint mechanical humor of the setup did not inspire a lot of laughter among the numbers but it was effective in its mesmerizing repetitiveness. The delicate choice of sparse movement made the tableau so mechanical and tantalizing; it didn't want to create an illusion of a lifelike situation, it unveiled life as a program. The human bodies were set in motion through an ingenious but invisible mechanism—probably water-propelled, as humans consist of 70 percent liquid. Context-wise this was also a historical reference to ancient water clocks.

The WatchWatch was, as always, a very artificial and excessive event. In form it was an exaggeration, a spectacular wrapping. One of the dramatic features of a WatchWatch was of course the fact that time did not heal any wounds, and the tiny humans on display carried that burden very well. But as the night continued, the numbers started to get excited, sensing the inevitable coming of the event's grand finale, anticipated by a tidal slowing down and speeding up of the music. All were waiting for the moment when the hour hand, minute hand, and second hand

reached the apex of the dial on the hovering clock—the moment of Countdown, the irrevocable sacrifice and destruction of a random number. That’s right: one among them would be killed tonight. At the moment of execution, the name of the number would be called out for the last time.

None of the numbers took itself into consideration, though it could happen to any of them. If it were their turn, they wouldn’t know and certainly wouldn’t remember.

People didn’t understand that when a person dies, disappears, or is killed, whatever, it didn’t make the slightest difference—people are easily forgotten and readily replaced. They are so dependent on personal memory that a couple of generations was sufficient to clean the dirtiest slate. But when a number is killed, it is truly obliterated. A number was and is irreplaceable: its empty place would remain empty forever. And through this cavity, eternity stared back. This was the fundamental distinction between people and numbers. It was a drama people could never attain and one not even the Greeks could have imagined.

There was silence.

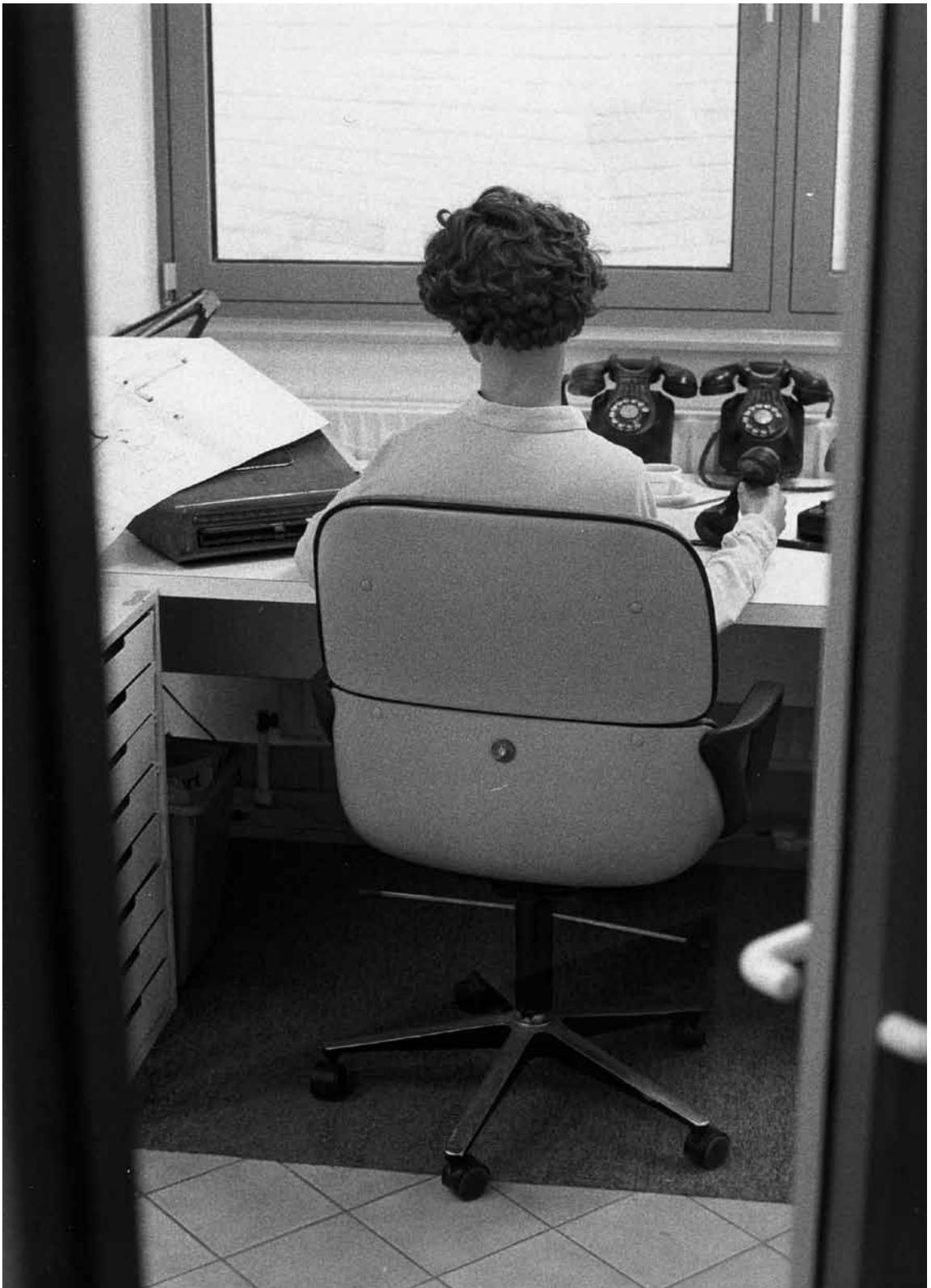
“THIRTY-EIGHT.” The name echoed.

The commotion that followed was taken advantage of by some of the younger numbers. They moved inconspicuously toward the base of the clock. The tiny people, looking as if awakened from a spell, came out of the elevator cabin moaning on their hands and knees. They were dazed and in pain. The water that had propelled them now started to work retroactively as an enema. Bleak shit-colored liquid streamed out of them. The little girl in the nightgown was crying. The juvenile pack of numbers encircled the little people and looked in amazement at their shivering fragility.

“You think they can they understand us?” said one of the numbers.

“Don’t be afraid. We just want to see how you function.” He grabbed one of the people by his ankles and then, with a brisk jerk, tore him apart. The numbers passed the limbs to each other. They touched them, squeezed them, and simulated the bending of the joints. Some sniffed at the flesh and licked it. But most of all they were surprised by the health that radiated from the torn-open bodies—such comforting warmth. It felt like a welcome home. How pleasant it must be to inhabit such people.



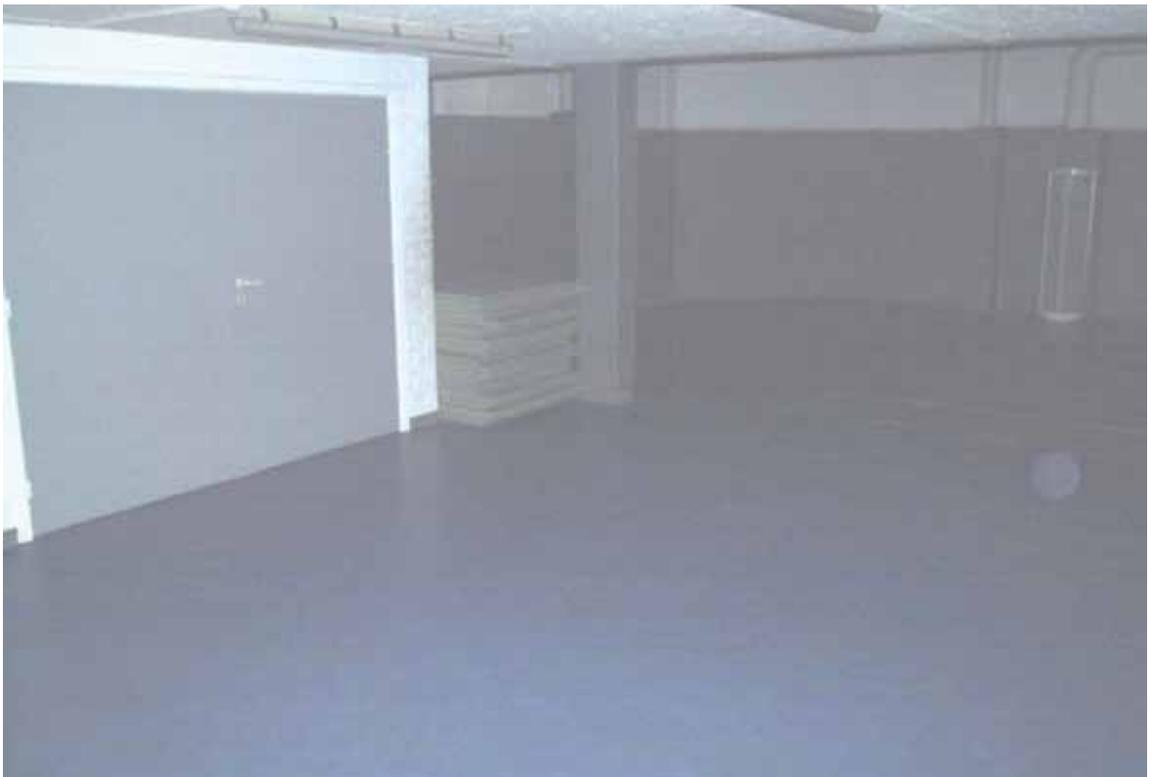


Puppets represent different staff (such as the receptionist and the sports instructor) at the community center Ten Weyngaert, where the eponymous video was filmed in 2007.





TEN WEYNGAERT



Youth Bar in the video *Ten Weyngaert* (2007) and the gym at Ten Weyngaert.



Klottesmans lying on a mattress.



The Jaguar Mark 2 used by Fritz in *Das Loch* (2010) to win the Mille Miglia in Italy, and the White Elements, a large annual event held in Velden, Austria.



Manufacturing Hildegard for *Das Loch* (2010).





People sculpting horses out of clay.





A crowd at a performance of the Van Campen Royal Puppet Theater in Antwerp.





One of the actors from the video *Ten Weyngaert* (2010).

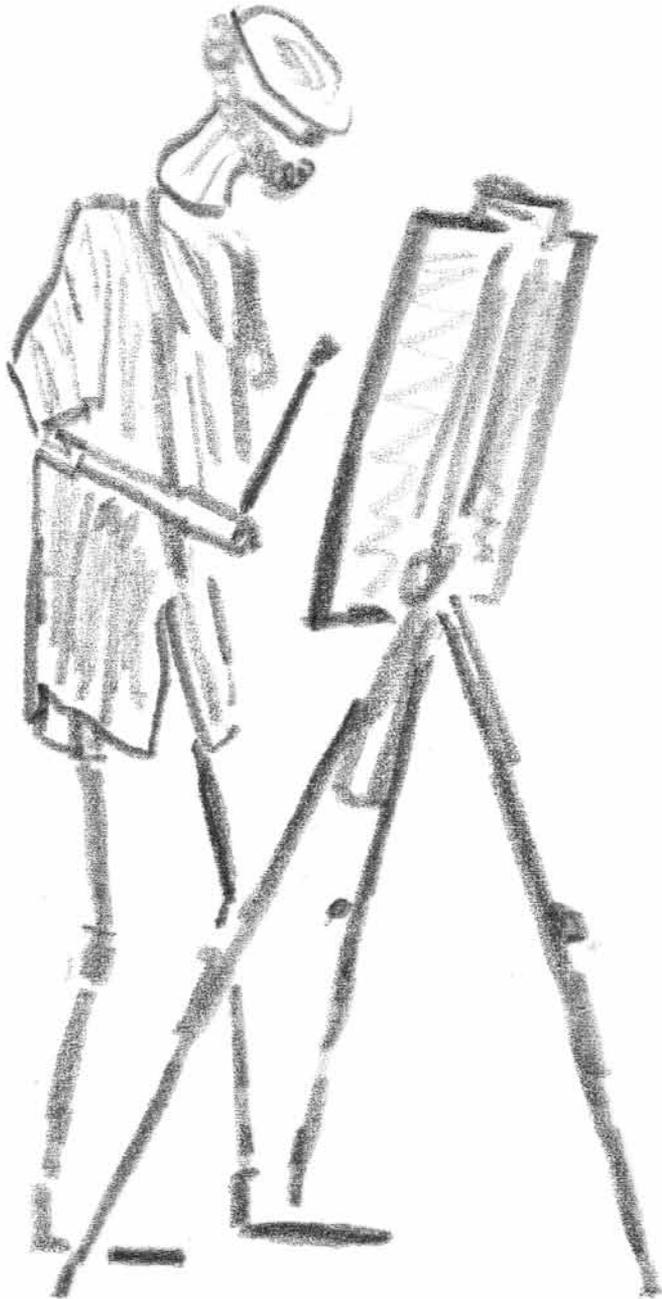
**menu de Kwik & Kwak**  
**donderdag /jeudi:**

**9h: pudding**

**14h: poulet avec choco**

**16h: biscuits allemandes**

**20h: endouillettes avec  
tomates et choco**



Johannes in the video *Das Loch* (2010).

# ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE REAL WORLD AND THE PARALLEL WORLD

A STUDY  
WITHIN THE CONTEXT  
OF PROJEKT 13\*

\* "Projekt 13" was the title of the exhibition by Jos de Gruyer & Harald Thys at Kunsthalle Basel, winter 2010.

In this study, we examine the relationship between the real world and the parallel world and how they influence each other.

**We will see that there are different ways of influence.**

**We will also become familiar with the force fields at play between the real world and the parallel world.**

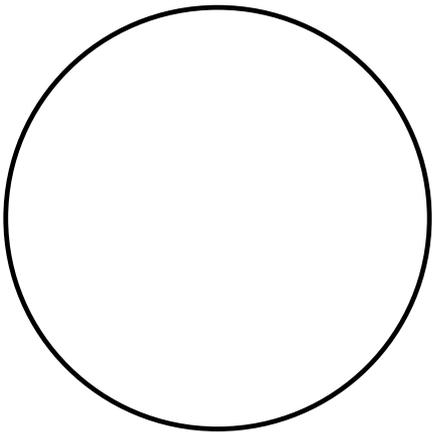
**We will simulate a mental displacement from the real world to the parallel world.**

**Finally, we will witness a physical symbiosis between the real world and the parallel world.**

Firstly though, we will give a short description of the concepts “real world” and “parallel world.”

The real world is the world as we experience it in reality.

We depict it as a completely black circle.

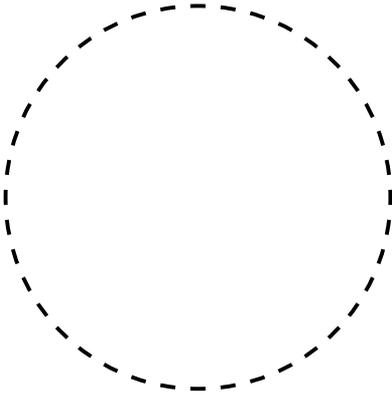


REAL WORLD

At first sight we are dealing with reality. The perception of that reality is, however, subjective, and therefore different for every individual. The circle shown here is the most objective way of depicting the real world. It is not open to interpretation.

The parallel world is a world adjacent to the real world.

We represent it as a dotted circle.



## PARALLEL WORLD

It is difficult to give a correct definition of the parallel world.

There are two tendencies that propagate a hypothetical visualization of the parallel world: “one-dimensionality” and “multidimensionality.”

One-dimensionality refers to a world very similar to the real world but in which certain laws from the real world do not apply. The dimension of time in the parallel world would thus be of a different order. Also, the concept of spatiality would not exist in the parallel world. It would be a one-dimensional world without light or dark.

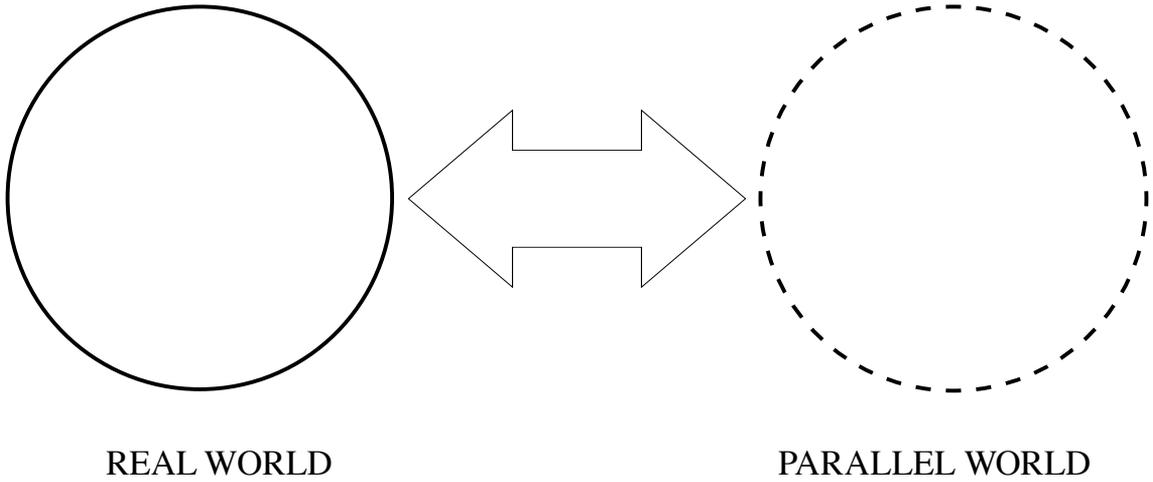
In accordance with its multidimensional tendency, the parallel world would contain an endless number of dimensions, but the dimension of time would be of the same order as in the real world.

In this exposé we support the one-dimensional tendency.

Furthermore, we limit our examples to situations in which the human being is central. Our exposé is, however, applicable to all the elements we know from the real world.

### **How the Real World and the Parallel World relate to one another**

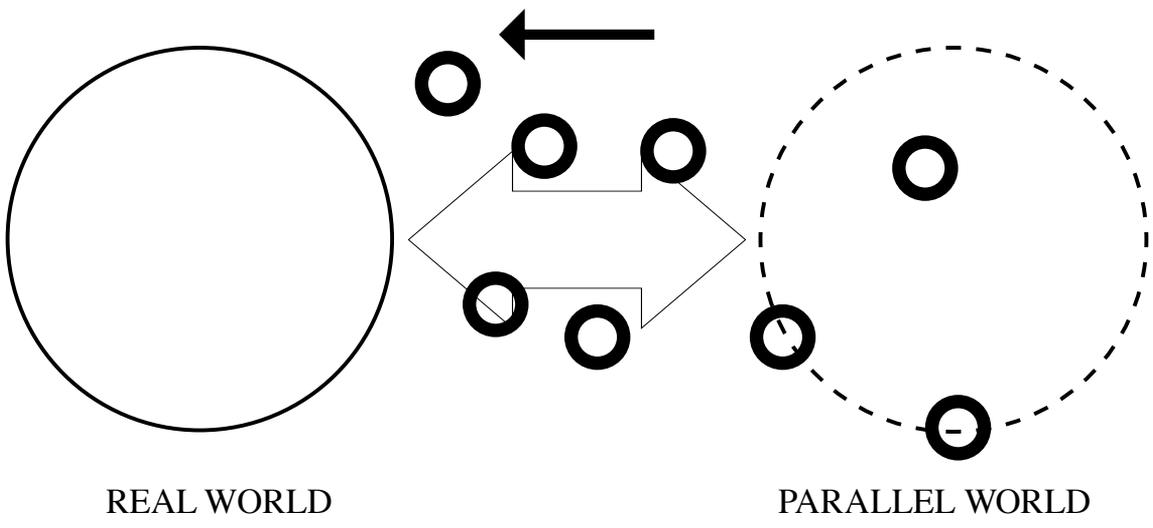
Between the real world and the parallel world a very strong magnetic field prevails. In a normal situation, this field keeps itself in balance and the worlds drift about always the same distance apart.



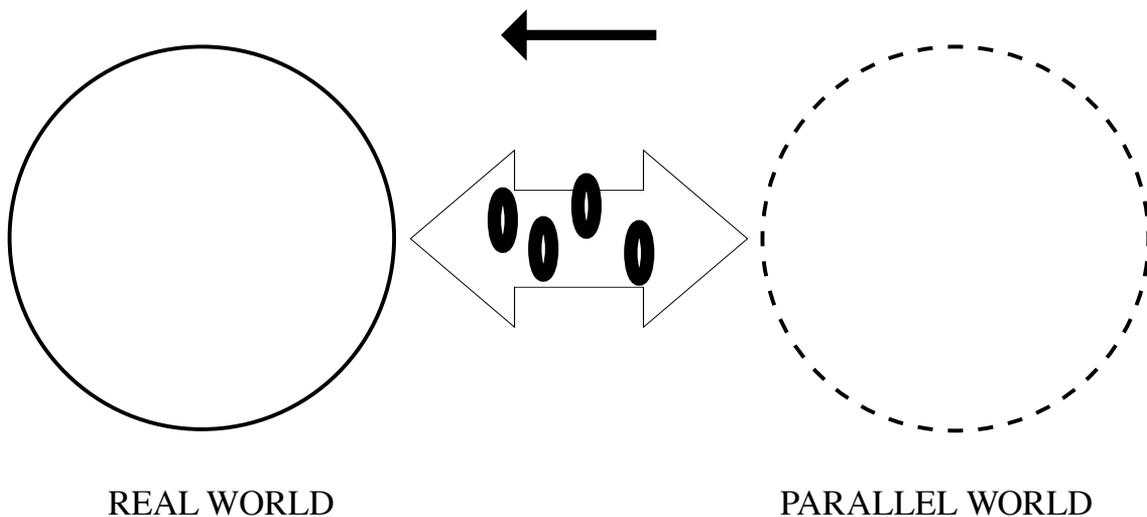
**Influences from the Parallel World**

**1. Saboteurs**

Saboteurs are particles from the parallel world that carry out an attack on the real world. If saboteurs embed themselves in this magnetic field, it can create an imbalance that reduces the magnetic field.



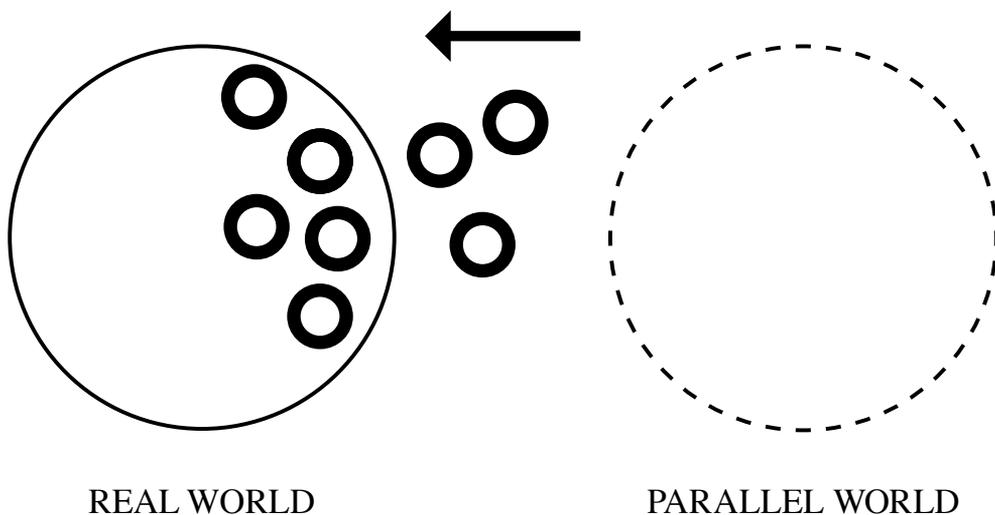
Only if their number and intensity are large enough can saboteurs cause such a strong disturbance in the magnetic field that the real world and the parallel world collide. Usually though, they are neutralized in the magnetic field. They become flattened under their own weight. One speaks here of the “flattening phenomenon.”



## 2. Parasites

### 2A. Parasitic Storm

An attack by parasites, also called a parasitic storm, occurs regularly and can greatly destabilize the real world. They are small creatures from the parallel world that silently enter the real world and nestle there. It is always their intention to acquire absolute power over the real world.



In normal circumstances, the real world can arm itself against this phenomenon. The parasites are then identified, surrounded, and eliminated.

Let us clarify this by way of an example:

A man rings someone's bell.  
The man says:  
"May I come in?  
To wit, I am your brother."  
The other man says:  
"No, that is not true.  
I have no brother."  
And he closes the door again.  
The man goes away again, into the street.

In this example the man was recognized as a parasite and he disappears back into the parallel world.

## **2B. Mutated Parasites**

Sometimes it happens that a parasite from the parallel world takes the form of an inhabitant of the real world. He is then no longer recognizable and can therefore no longer be eliminated. He multiplies himself and forever tries to nestle into the real world. We speak here of mutated parasites.

Our example, then, is as follows:

A man rings someone's bell.  
The man says:  
"May I come in?  
To wit, I am your brother."  
The other man says:  
"Aha, I didn't know that."  
The man goes inside.

In this case the man is not recognized as a parasite. He has mutated himself before ringing the bell.

### **2B.1. Passive Mutation**

In the best case, after several generations the mutant adopts the conduct of the occupant of the real world and assumes his identity. He slowly loses his genetic characteristics and fully merges into the real world. We speak here of "passive mutation."

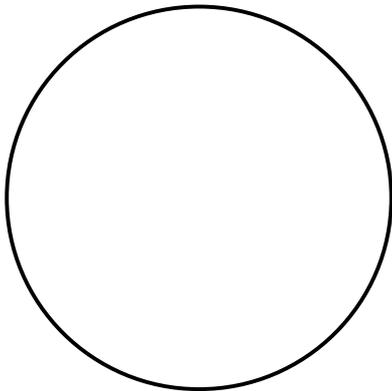
### **2B.2. Active Mutation**

Now and then, however, the parasite is able to conceal his true identity, sometimes across several generations. When the parasite determines that the time is right, he reveals his true form and destroys his bystanders. This phenomenon we describe as "active mutation."

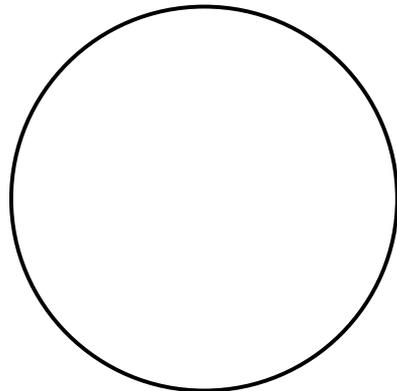
### 3. Imitation Phenomenon

We call an even more drastic threat from the parallel world the “imitation phenomenon.” The parallel world disguises itself, as it were, and assumes the shape of the real world.

Both worlds are identical. This causes great confusion among the inhabitants of both worlds. Their behavior is enigmatic.



REAL WORLD



PARALLEL WORLD

We illustrate this with an example:

A man rings someone's bell.

The man says:

“May I come in?

I'm not your brother but people say that I am your brother.”

The other man says:

“Yes that's right.

That is what people say.”

The man goes inside.

The strange apathy that this incident overshadows is the cause of this strange situation.

The big question remains, however:

“Is there a consciousness behind the parallel world that sends these things?”

There are different theories. One of them states that the parallel world is a mirror of the real world and every attack from the parallel world would therefore be a form of self-destruction.

The real world that tries to eliminate itself...

## Influence from the Real World

### 1. Shift Syndrome

Let us take an example from the real world:

A man says to his brother:

“I’m not feeling well.

I’m going to get some air.

See you later.”

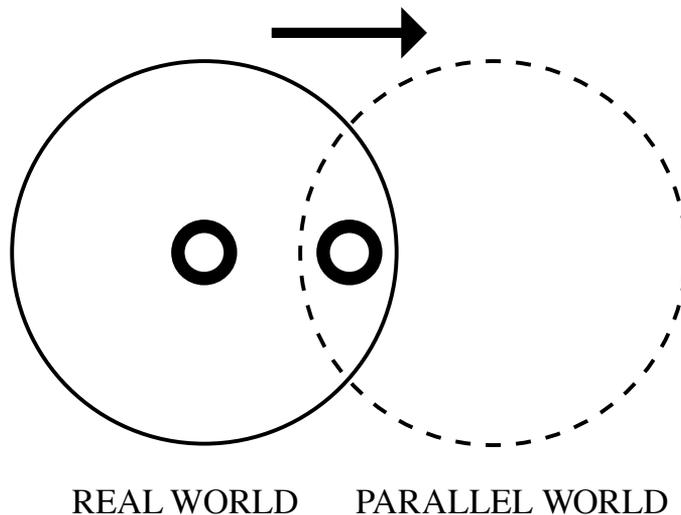
The brother leaves the house and goes out into the street.

The brother comes back a bit later.

On arriving back the man claims to no longer recognize his brother.

He says that his brother is acting peculiar.

We look at this example once again in reference to our circles:



Here there is talk of the shift syndrome. Voluntarily or involuntarily, the brother has gone into the parallel world for a few moments. Evidently the short span of time in the example was sufficient for him to take on characteristics of the parallel world. His personality has what we call “shifted,” and he has become unrecognizable. Physically, though, he is definitely still present in the real world. Mentally, he is in the parallel world. The mutation has situated itself in the overlapping area between the two circles. After some time, if the brother becomes recognizable again, we speak of a “temporally shifted personality.” If he is no longer recognizable, we speak of a “terminally shifted personality.” In this case, the brother will be cast out; in other words, he will wander eternally in the overlapping area.

Taking another example that is a variation on the former:

A man says to his brother:

“I’m not feeling well.

I’m going to get some air.

See you later.”

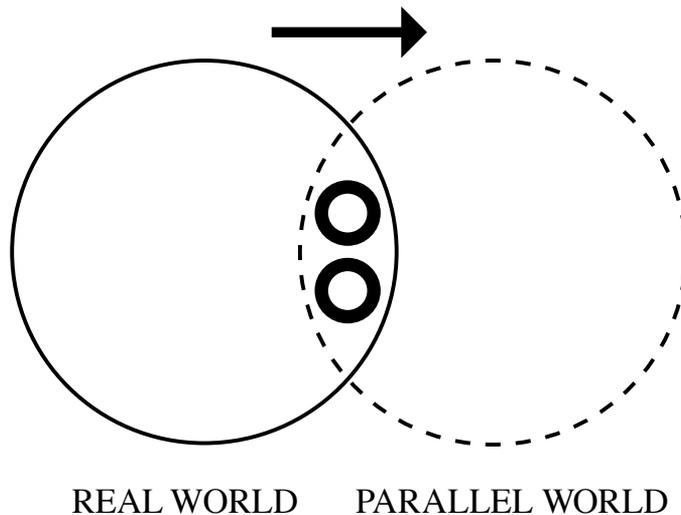
The man says:

“I’ll go with you.”

Both brothers leave the house and go out into the street.

A bit later, the two brothers come back.

On arriving home, they proceed with their day.



In this case, only outsiders will be able to determine whether or not they are still recognizable; in other words, whether their personality has shifted or not.

## **2. Disappearance Phenomenon**

Taking yet another example:

A man says to his brother:

“I’m not feeling well.

I’m going to get some air.

See you later.”

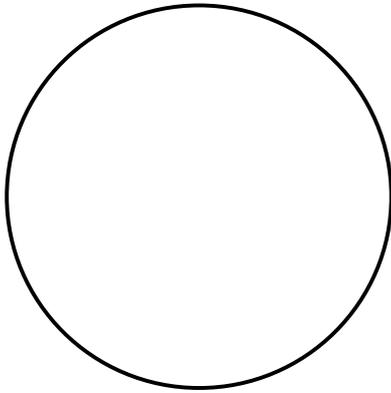
The brother leaves the house and goes out into the street.

The brother never comes back.

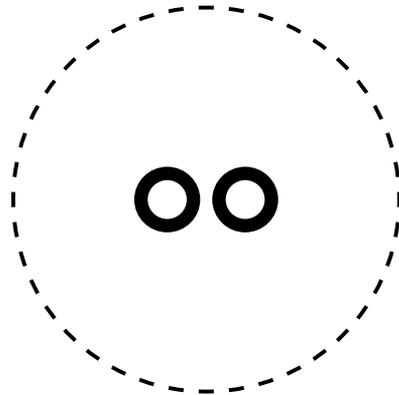
He has disappeared.

In this case, not only has his personality terminally shifted, he is also terminally embedded in the parallel world. He has disappeared from the real world but he still thoroughly exists in the parallel world. We speak here of the “disappearance phenomenon.”

The man will only be able to find his brother again if he himself disappears.



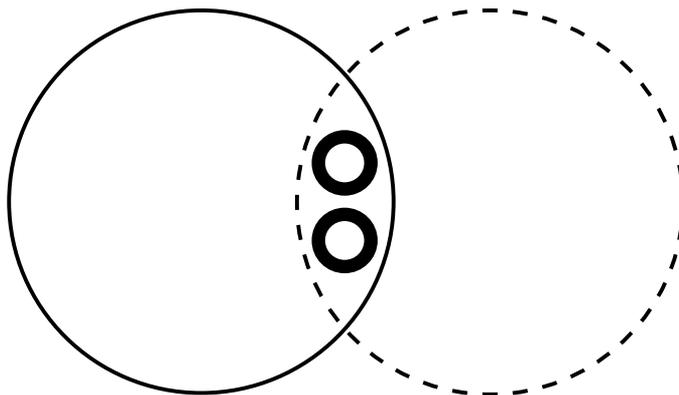
REAL WORLD



PARALLEL WORLD

### 3. Permanent Parallelism

In the previous examples we saw a temporary overlap between the real world and the parallel world, with or without permanent consequences. The overlap between the two worlds can, however, be of a permanent nature. In this case, the overlapping area is populated by parallel entities that mingle with real entities. As they have been parallel since the beginning of their existence, they have remained unnoticed. From the real world they are experienced as real but in essence they are parallel. Here one speaks of “permanent parallelism.”

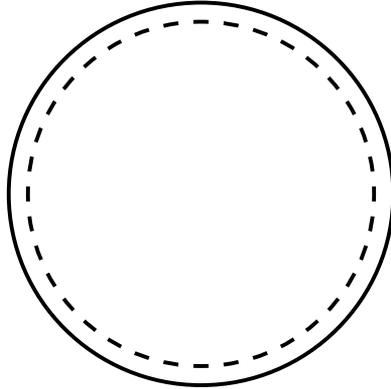


REAL WORLD

PARALLEL WORLD

## Simultaneous Shift

In the beginning of our exposé, we saw how the parallel world shifts to the real world. Afterward we saw how the real world shifts to the parallel world. It is also possible, however, that both worlds shift in relation to each other and evolve into a situation where the overlap is nullified. A complete symbiosis between the real world and the parallel world.



In this new terminal phase, real and parallel worlds coincide. In this situation, which is irreversible, no single particle knows whether or not it or another particle is real or parallel. The external assessment is canceled because they have all become internal. They're trapped in one and the same world. A world from which one never emerges again.

# DISCONNECTING PEOPLE

## Art and Objecthood, Now and Then

DIETER ROELSTRAETE

“Objects as Friends” is the title of an exhibition by Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys organized at Mu.ZEE in Ostend, Belgium, in the summer of 2012. The show consisted of some three hundred digital photographs of identical proportions depicting seemingly random, brightly lit assemblies of cheap, battered, and soiled objects—the project’s titular commodities, items, products, *things*—shot against a recurring gray background and standing or lying (or both) on a dust-stained floor. (Most stood, in fact, thereby already emitting the faint anthropomorphic charge of “friendliness,” as in a presumably benign android.) A tire, a stool, a rubber boot, a dismembered umbrella, something that looks vaguely—on my undersized computer screen, that is—like a chocolate statuette of Joseph Stalin, two wooden spoons caught in a precarious balancing act; many things appear broken, quite a few picked up from the street, stealthily snatched up (at night of course) from a pile of garbage cluttering a sewer in the artists’ notoriously unkempt Brussels hood, only a handful actually bought for a proverbial euro in one of those one-euro shops whose garish interior lighting is so successfully duplicated in these bleak, underwhelming still-lives. Quite a few of the assorted “friendly” objects were actually taken from the expanding family of props amassed during the artists’ twenty-plus-year career in film and video; a few were borrowed, tellingly, from actual family members (objects, in other words, are not just friends: they constitute families too).

None of the arrangements and ensembles in these blanched-out tableaux has the dramatic stage presence of some of the more compelling examples of objecthood familiar to hardened followers of de Gruyter & Thys’s work, such as the mighty, and mightily enigmatic, model ship after which their video *The Frigate* (2008) is named, or the clay sculptures featured in *Der Schlamm von Branst* (The Clay from Branst, 2008). (The aforementioned frigate is also featured in a series of photographs made in 2009, and has gone on to lead a most fascinating afterlife.) And compared to the much more ambiguous (and ambitious) objects that have actively stood in previously for live actors, such as the bespectacled robotic dolls, beret-sporting dummies, and bearded mannequins strutting their stuff in *Das Loch* (The Hole, 2010), the drab-n-dreary motley crew of overexposed things gathered together in “Objects as Friends” appears singularly primitive, like protozoa to the much more evolved organisms that people the animal kingdom’s higher echelons. (The comparison is obviously not without meaning, as animals too have put in more than a perfunctory handful of appearances in de Gruyter & Thys’s work over the years. In a memorable 2004 performance titled *The 48 hours of Kwik and Kwak*, the artists even dressed up as two oversized, overall-wearing primates.)

In fact, the artists' increased enthusiasm for, and increasing reliance upon, such jarring simplicity as exemplified in "Objects as Friends"—some of the objects portrayed in these photographs make even the poorest of Arte Povera pieces look like something out of Jeff Koons's studio—is very much in tune with the progressively reductive logic of their work as a whole, continuously pushing the envelope, getting ever closer to the putative bone. (Are there any bones in "Objects as Friends"? There could and should be: bones are among the most ambivalent of objects, so exquisitely designed to make friends—with *animals*.) What does it mean, then, for these particular objects to be our, or their, friends? Why are they our, or their, friends? How can they be our, or their, friends? And whose place do they take by becoming our, or their, friends?

Here, a remark is in order concerning the decidedly hi-tech character of the actual photographs that effectively constitute "Objects as Friends"—the *images* of the things as opposed to the things in themselves, imaged, depicted. The dirt-poor props parading around in this series were actually shot using one of the world's most advanced digital cameras, and the deep contradiction between the poverty of the materials on display and the extremely high resolution of their portraits certainly figures as a defining feature of the work—the exact type of oxymoron that structures much of de Gruyter & Thys's troubled, murky universe (hence the reference to both Arte Povera and Jeff Koons). Why expend so much effort on "seeing" when, in a certain sense, there's really nothing to see, when a crude cluster of coarse pixels would do just as well? It seems tempting to read the work as an allegorical commentary on the contemporary obsession with high definition, with total visibility—one of the cornerstones, as it so happens, of contemporary pornocracy. (We will return to the discourse of pornography's "frenzy of the visible" later on in this essay.) The decision to cast the all-seeing telescopic eye of HD culture on the lumpen proletariat of things, finally, also comes weighed down by notions of *class*, the sociological crucible of the specter of bad taste that has such a powerful hold on de Gruyter & Thys's imagination—though that discussion cannot be entered into at present.

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To those who have had the chance to immerse themselves in the burgeoning transdisciplinary academic field of material culture studies, object studies, and thing theory, the title "Objects as Friends" may recall an important text by the little-known Russian art historian and literary critic Boris Arvatov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing." In this essay, published in 1925 at a fateful juncture in the development of the young Soviet state, Arvatov prophesied that "the construction of proletarian culture, that is, of a culture consciously organized by the working class, requires the elimination of that rupture between Things and people that characterized bourgeois society. [...] Proletarian society will not know this dualism of things either in practice or in consciousness. To the contrary, this society will be ideologically

imbued with the deepest sense of Things.”<sup>1</sup> People and things will be one; people will become thing-like, and things will become people-like. (Arvatov’s essay appeared shortly after Sigmund Freud’s landmark study of *das Unheimliche*, or the uncanny, one crucial ingredient of which, in Freud’s estimation, was the uncertainty whether an object is living or inanimate. Clearly, subject/object confusions of all kinds were in the air after the First World War.)<sup>2</sup> In the same year, one of the leading lights of the Constructivist art movement, Aleksandr Rodchenko, spoke of the Russian experiment in art along comparable lines in the following fragment from a letter written while on a sojourn in Paris: “The light from the East is not only the liberation of the workers, the light from the East is in the new relation to the person, to the woman, to things. Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades, and not these black and mournful slaves, as they are here.”<sup>3</sup> Things must be our equals, comrades—*friends*.

The politics of such a friendship requires a certain degree of intimacy: an understanding of things, or true grasping of their thingness, that may involve ourselves becoming more thing-like in turn. (Think of the robotic routines the human actors are regularly put through in de Gruyter & Thys’s earlier films, quite a few of whom are actually recruited from the artists’ immediate families.)<sup>4</sup> Here, it may be useful to expand the conceptual scope of our reflection to also include Martin Heidegger’s celebrated musings on things and thingness from the immediate postwar era, articulated most comprehensively in his lecture “The Thing” from 1950. Heidegger’s poetic rant is spurred on in part by his familiar charge that we have “forgotten” or forsaken the

1 Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing,” trans. Christina Kiaer, *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997): 121. Arvatov was born in Kiev in 1896; after studying in Riga and Petrograd, he was quick to join the Russian revolutionary forces, and already in 1918 served as academic secretary for Proletkult, “the mass working-class organization established immediately after the October Revolution in 1917 to promote the formation of an ideologically pure form of proletarian culture.” Christina Kiaer, “Boris Arvatov’s Socialist Objects,” *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997): 107. In 1920, Arvatov became a member of INKhUK, the Moscow-based Institute of Artistic Culture that would become the ideological home of Russian Constructivism; in 1923, he was one of the founding members of the Left Front of the Arts that also attracted the likes of Osip Brik, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Viktor Shklovsky, and Dziga Vertov. Arvatov’s essay was published at the height of Lenin’s controversial experiment in state capitalism, the “New Economic Policy.” Signaling a reconciliation (of sorts) with the culture of commodity capitalism after the hardships of doctrinaire war communism, it is hardly surprising that the New Economic Policy provided the broad political and socioeconomic backdrop against which the Constructivist infatuation with production—the production of artworks, commodities, objects—would reach its critical apogee. In his 2008 collection of essays *Art Power*, Boris Groys emphasized the cruel irony of how the only period in twentieth-century Russian art history to have consistently earned the endorsement of canonical “Western” historiography was indeed this brief seven-year period in the 1920s in which a limited free market was temporarily reintroduced in the Soviet Union.

2 See Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” trans. James Strachey, in *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 14, *Art and Literature* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 347. Freud’s essay, originally published in 1919, was an important touchstone for the discussion of de Gruyter & Thys’s work in an early essay of mine titled “The Sacrificial Lamb,” which first appeared in *A Prior Magazine*, no. 11 (2005). The opening chapter of that essay is titled “On Kouklaphobia in Contemporary Art”; kouklaphobia is a neologism denoting the pathological fear of puppets—a fruitful notion, evidently, for theorizing the work of the artists in question.

3 Quoted in Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 1.

4 The fact that Thys’s father and sister in particular have often been called upon to perform in the artists’ stoic, à-huis-clos-styled anti-dramas obviously validates the recurrent referencing of Freudian metapsychology in discussions of their work.

thing in its thingness, a key quality of which is its nearness (for instance, its eligibility to rise to the status of “friend”). We know only *objects*—this is a pivotal distinction in all of Heidegger’s thinking about *Sein* and *Dasein* alike, a function of his challenge of the foundational Cartesian duality of subject and object; or rather, subject *versus* object. And objects are—by their very definition as corollaries of subjecthood—distant, vacant, dead. This distance, strangeness, and vacuity (not to mention the fact that they exist in such great numbers) make it all the easier for us to control, destroy, master, own, and trade in things. One of the main objectives or tasks of a new conception of being, in Heidegger’s view, is to truly think the thing in its nearness, a thinking that “responds and calls”—a dialogical thinking that addresses the thing as comrade, equal, friend.<sup>5</sup>

So far, however, we have not really addressed the question as to *why* these particular objects should be thought of as our, or their, friends. My proposed answer to that question is related to Heidegger’s notion of call-and-response: objects are friends because they do *not* talk back, possess, or participate (or all three) in the human scourge that is language. In the artists’ images, there is none of the sound pollution that has become such an essential feature of contemporary life. Indeed, the most compelling quality of de Gruyter & Thys’s work may well be its deliberate method of silencing, its gradual movement toward complete muteness, speechlessness. The viewer calls out, despairingly perhaps (he or she wants to “communicate,” and wants to be spoken to) and receives nothing but stony, sepulchral silence in return—the beginning, I’d say, of a beautiful friendship.

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The notion of speechlessness—the refusal or absence of speech, or both—has been at the core of some of my previous critical engagements with the artists’ collaborative work. In an essay titled “The Teaches of the Speechless,” I note that there are no heroic, Nietzschean loners in de Gruyter & Thys’s films, which revolve around the breakdown of all communication between different individuals who are seemingly forced upon each other. Needless to add, it is uncertain (or at least left undecided) whether this breakdown in communication should be regarded as a *tragedy*—comedy, after all, is the dominant register in which much of their work operates. Furthermore, in a more extensive discussion of *The Frigate* and looking back at de Gruyter & Thys’s older *Ten Weyngaert* (2006):

*The Frigate*, perhaps their greatest work to date, revolves around a black model ship that is at the center of a dense web of, yet again, wordless social

5 See Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 179. It is somewhat incongruous to reference the socialist rhetoric of Arvatov and Rodchenko’s comradeship in the context of Heidegger’s philosophy, so infamously corrupted by the master’s well-publicized revulsion of socialism—a very violent quarter century lies between the publication of Arvatov’s essay and Heidegger’s lecture.

interactions. [...] There is hardly any real movement in the film, and no talk or speech at all—just deranged snippets of random church organ music. The only dialogue in *Ten Weyngaert*, by the way, is a *monologue*, and a *monologue intérieure* too (so not really “talk” in the conventional sense at all), about a man who gets a lurid kick out of pinching a rare breed of Siberian jumping mice inside his trouser pockets; other than that, there are only disorienting bouts of sardonic laughter, much whining and weird huffing and puffing, and anxious, wheezy attempts at mastering some kind of guttural utterance in which only an epic effort of the imagination would discern the tottering first steps towards language.<sup>6</sup>

Connecting the dots with our earlier consideration of thingness, the following fragment, again discussing *The Frigate*, stands out: “A (Freudian, uncanny) *Thing* or cipher of thingness, [the frigate] casts its sinister spell on human subjects at once reduced to a state of animalistic silence, to pillars of salt and stone.” This biblical image leads us to the clay-sculpting workshop in *Der Schlamm von Branst*, in which “*langue* and *parole* have once again been replaced by muttering and stammering, by animal-like sounds.” The animal kingdom is where this excursion should probably wind down too, in a brief reflection upon *The 48 hours of Kwik and Kwak*, another work already touched upon: “The performance was remarkable for its *silence*—an absence of language and speech presented as a neo-dadaist way out of the cul-de-sac of the so-called ecstasy of communication.” The reference point here is Jean Baudrillard’s well-known 1983 essay “The Ecstasy of Communication”; it begins by stating that “there is no longer any system of objects.”<sup>7</sup> Commenting on the state of broad cultural affairs in the early 1980s, Baudrillard posits that “something has changed, and the Faustian, Promethean (perhaps Oedipal) period of production and consumption gives way to the ‘proteinic’ era of networks, to the narcissistic and protean era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication.”<sup>8</sup> Forget the object—connect instead. Clearly, it is this “universe of communication,” this “era of connections and contact” that has leaned so heavily on art’s ability to usher in the contemporary age of reticular babbling that de Gruyter & Thys seek to either escape or subvert in their work, and to a certain extent even in their life. Theirs truly is an art of “disconnecting people,” and they do so both by ruthlessly disassembling the communicative claims of language and by foregrounding the undiminished power

6 Dieter Roelstraete, “The Teaches of the Speechless,” *F.R.David*, no. 5 (Spring 2009): 169–79. (All subsequent quotes are taken from this source.) The closing words of this fragment inadvertently echo the title of one of Martin Heidegger’s better-known late works, *On the Way to Language*, which elaborates on his famous statement that “language is the house of being.” One could think of myriad variations upon this particular bon mot to describe the work of de Gruyter & Thys, starting with the obvious suggestion that language may just as well be the *prison house* of being.

7 Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication,” trans. John Johnston, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 126. Baudrillard’s opening salvo is an ironic reference, in turn, to his own 1968 book *Le système des objets*.

8 *Ibid.*, 127.

of the object—or a system of objects powerful enough to sustain a political economy of friendship.

And anyway, isn't it the greatest sign of friendship when two people can sit alone inside a room in complete and utter silence? Like lifeless objects on a table, bathed in the unifying light of total visibility? Or, alternately, on a sofa...?

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To conclude, let us briefly return to a source consulted earlier in this essay—namely, the letter written by Rodchenko during his 1925 visit to Paris: “The light from the East is in the new relation to the person, to the woman, to things.” Rereading this passage, one is reminded of the fact that, back in the 1920s, personhood and womanhood did not necessarily coincide; there were persons, and then there were women. And then, fatefully, there were things. What, exactly, is implied in this peculiar enumeration—that women bridge the gap between persons and things? However this may be, I am rereading this passage with greater attention now than before, for in an early conversation with the artists about my very contribution, Harald and Jos suggested that I devote my essay to the topic of “The Woman in the Work of de Gruyter & Thys.” They did so half in jest of course, or fully joking—or maybe, just maybe, secretly serious. In any case, there aren't really that many women in their work; mostly only Babi, as Thys's sister is affectionately known in the artists' inner circle. In an especially disturbing scene in *The Frigate*, Babi is shown seated on a sofa, surrounded by the erect, headless bodies of the film's lugubrious male protagonists (one of whom is her other brother in real life, a psychiatrist by profession). A series of macabre *tableaux vivants* (why are these never called, much more appropriately, *tableaux morts*?) unfolds in which Babi is encircled, manhandled, shown posing on all fours, her derriere thrust to the camera's unflinching, stoic gaze. The lurid image of an amateur porn shoot is conjured (a gloomy garage adjoining a freestanding house in the Flemish Ardennes, the blinds always drawn), and we are reminded of the fact that in most (heterosexual) pornography, whether of the professional, semiprofessional, or amateur variety, the male body appears almost always headless, certainly faceless—usually little more than the unappetizing, unwieldy appendage of a magically inflated penis—truly cinematic dead weight, “the object of an object.”<sup>9</sup> This has led a number of discerning observers to suggest that it is *men*, actually, who are objectified in pornography; it is men whose bodies are reduced to sex objects in the strict and strong sense of the word. Women, at least, are shown to (still) be in the possession of heads, therefore brains—which, in some doubtlessly perverse way, invests them with power, no matter how compromised or compromising. Or: the object becomes subject again, the thing both brought and coming to life.<sup>10</sup> The aforementioned

9 Susan Faludi, *Stuffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), 535.

10 “The male performers in these films are objectified too, indeed, [...] they are even less ‘humanized’ than the women, who are, after all, the focus of attention.” Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (London: Pandora Press, 1990), 57.

key scene (or string of scenes) from *The Frigate*, in short, suspends the question of identifying subject and object in this particular tableau, which is probably exemplary of de Gruyter and Thys's practice as a whole, precisely because of this taunting resistance to identification. Who is who and what is what—or rather, who is what and what is who—must forever remain unclear, unresolved. We are only told to keep in mind that subjects, on the whole, are evil, and objects are friends.

# COME ON

PETER WÄCHTLER

After they took everything I ever had from me I stepped outside to meet up with The Pig. It was a warm night and I saw him waiting for me under a big lime tree aside the vast and empty parking lot, just as agreed. He was not hiding, but stood close to the big tree's trunk. His head was moving from left to right and right to left, as if he were looking at a highway where only big and fancy cars at constant top speed would be permitted. The kind of cars The Pig liked to drive. I approached him with the same old feelings in my chest. He remained in the shade and kept shaking his head. Beside many things, that meant he would not talk at all tonight. I surely had talked enough already. The Pig raised his big arm and pointed it in the direction of the nightly forest, then started walking. I walked next to him. The air in the forest was cooler and a smell of dried tree trunks and gas hung in it. We took the main path to the lake. It was dark, but still you could tell the light-colored soil of the pathway from the vegetation on each side.

I was sure that some ranger must be responsible for maintaining this dirt track. If I were that ranger I would tell the local lumberjacks to take good care that the forest's trails were not overgrown, and I would step out of my jeep, the only car allowed in the forest, and see how they'd work and execute my orders. By now these lumberjacks are either mentally disabled or they have at least a bachelor in forest cultivation—there are practically no positions left in between.

Although I never worked myself, I used to discuss a lot with my friends about the difference between labor and maintenance and other significant changes in the hard-fought fields of employment. We agreed that “to maintain” took over the meaning that “to battle” used to have and that in this sense our streets and forest paths are maintained by units of hard-boiled special forces dressed in signal colors instead of camouflage. But if I were that ranger I would drive home in my jeep in the evening and lock the thick oak door of the forester's house behind me with its rustic-looking but highly secure bolts. Honestly, if I were that ranger I would be so embarrassed with myself that after a substantial dinner I would shove that classy shotgun in my mouth and train my terrier how to pull the trigger. It would take weeks for that creature to do the trick, but he would succeed. Terriers are highly intelligent animals. And of course he would be trained so that he would never feed from his master's corpse. I would be rotting away and he would be starving, as I just could not leave that heavy oak door standing open. There should be a way to save that talented companion, but I stopped thinking about the forester's house at that point. And I was happy that no one from that poor discussion circle was around.

I trotted silently with The Pig next to me, while our feet made dry and dusty sounds.

After twenty minutes we saw the beams of light through the trees and could hear the beats. Labeled light sticks had been stuck into the ground on both sides of the path to lead the way. I saw The Pig bending down and throwing those sticks as far as possible into the forest. And that was very far. I could not see the sticks landing—their chemical glow lapsed unseen. He was also kicking some of the sticks until we arrived at the clearing at the lakeside.

The party grounds were big, very big. You could not get a single view of the whole grounds, but the structure it offered to the crowd looked refined, well planned, and suitable for rich people who want to go crazywild. In this respect, it helps that the annual event can look back on twenty years of party experience. The reach of its publicity has constantly widened over these twenty years and the event has grown. Despite their international reputation, the organizers—an ultrarich family of big-ass hoteliers—retained the original, rather rural graphic design and rejected any changes leading to multilingual menu boards. Together with a wide range of international Klim-Bim cocktails, the menu promoted the tasteless products of a local brewery whose stale bestseller was conceived by obese monks of the Dark Ages in The Old Abbey, where they patiently created a local delicacy by fooling the gag reflex.

The people who came here claimed that they would do so every year and that you can't beat that lake. Everybody had a good reason to be here and to come back next year. On top of this, the party's special feature is that everybody has to wear white. They would have done so anyway and of course you could see people here and there who wore a blue polo shirt with badly hidden discomfort, but in general everybody was wearing white.

There were two huge white tents, each of them packed. Harshly illuminated faces queuing for drinks and food, chatting at party tables, sitting on beer benches, staring at the oily dancers on stage that rubbed their material to sticks, poles, cages, and amateur entertainers, who sometimes ascended from the crowd to show their skills. The women on stage were beautiful and agile. The women down in the crowd looked similar, but more like the red-faced sisters who could not handle their bodies or their drinks. Their fun came in groups of ten of their best female friends. The slightly older women stood in some bitter barbecue zone, a glass in one hand and a plate with some bread and mustard left on it in the other, nodding themselves through chats about education. The men were healthy looking and still on a pure gentlemanly level. Most of them, undestroyable characters that came down to compete with the like-minded. Mature and severe-looking youngsters and well-conserved bosses in their forties, dressed in elegant white shirts. But you could already feel how they were charging their veins and white linen pants with that thick and vulgar glue, which soon would spray out to sprinkle the summery soil and glue the glasses to their lips and numerous female hands to their genitals. But for now they were overlooking the masses, enjoying the moderate part of the evening. Crude, dazzling laser light shot at the dancers' heads. The dance floor was packed with people dreaming of endless oral sex, and we, The Pig and I, we were dreamers too.

The Pig was walking in front, pushing people out of the way. He almost stumbled over a break-dancer who was in the midst of some complicated spin. The Pig kicked him hard. The people moved as if they were constantly being observed by their parents. I hardly could bear looking at it. The Pig reached the bar. I ordered, and we started to drink and look around.

I then realized that the man next to me at the counter was an actor. I couldn't think of a single film he was in, but I was sure that he was in the business. I might have seen his films when I was younger, as he was older than how I remembered him. He must have been a handsome man when he was my age, and still in his fifties he looked better than I ever will. By the way he was ordering, smoking, and chatting at the bar you could see that he was professionally filling his slightly off-center actor's position in this wealthy international party crowd. I tapped him on the shoulder and told him that his face looked familiar to me. He ordered me a drink and spoke about movie stars only using their first name. I told him what kind of films I like and felt how I enjoyed speaking witty words about dumb things such as these films. We both kept on praising actors who were clearly doing shit. I became enthusiastic and tried to say words that would go along with his pseudo-aristocratic haircut. Although his hair was beginning to gray at the temples, it was still mainly blond, mid length, and combed back. He had a slender face with watery blue eyes, in which talent, vanity, crisis, and hope had left behind the blood-red cracks of nonfulfillment. These eyes were comfortably upholstered by swollen sacks of un-cried tears. He never blinked, which I think is an actor's thing. He is trained to master discomfort and personal confrontation and to stare at people without blinking. I hate to even think about any kind of body language. I am sure if I were an actor I would be so embarrassed by myself, you can't imagine. I would stare at my half-assed colleagues all of the time and say things like "I have always known." After some years all that I could think of would be relaxation.

I listened to the actor's stories about failing agents and language coaches and jobs he canceled because the role did not suit him. Now and then I turned around to see how The Pig was doing. He stood there, staring at the bartender, and moved his head from left to right and from right to left. Sometimes he would hang his heavy head low just to lift it up again for drinking and grunting. The actor was then talking about women and that it doesn't make any sense to be with somebody you don't love. According to him, that would be a waste of time and that this was the truth and that young women are gorgeous. I could not quite concentrate. Over and over my mind wandered off to settle down in a different mental district: the Land of Punishment. Would I want to punish that man for living his life the way he does? Do I really think of myself as a superior being in a world of filth? Do I really want to judge this shitty critter of an actor by his behavior toward me? A poor old has-been, just some small, sad years and a very few drinks ahead of me? Did I just come here for that? Yes.

I knew exactly where this man's position was: My new drinking buddy had installed his bar stool in front of the big black iron gate leading to the Land of

Punishment. This big-eyed puppet was not a guardian nor a doorman; he was stranded on brink of the next level; he was unable to pass the gate himself and mumbled his bluesy sermon into his GnT while investigating me for the code names and passwords that he himself had long forgotten or never known.

You see that sometimes with very good-looking men who only go out with equally good-looking women. And sometimes you see how hard they tried and that the woman looks good, but not that good, and this causes pain and horror of tragic dimensions. All his efforts are just sufficient to illustrate how close he got to what he really wanted. Everybody sees how far he made it, and the closer you come the harder you fail. When I gazed at the actor again I was sure that his kind was very close to extinction and I also realized that I was unfortunately one of his last true apprentices.

Maybe that's why this man stirred something inside of me. It was not only the feeling that I would never be happy in my entire life, it was more than that: I envisioned a new era dawning in the Land of Punishment, that the world behind the black gate was dramatically changing, that it would cross its borders in time and space. And I already could see lightning striking the horizon of that swampy sphere. I heard the thunder rolling loudly and I heard big metal vultures announcing the new era with long and piercing screams of pain and lust. I was so convinced of this that I even told it to the actor, who was having severe difficulty keeping himself on his white bar chair. I was sure that he would miss out on the importance of our encounter so I raised my voice.

“These rusty black gates that destroyed your life will soon be wide open for everybody, my mimicking friend. This gate will open up in a smooth, soundless, mechanical manner and will give everybody a free view of the vast Land of Punishment. The people will flood the new land and again they will not wait for you. They will march straight over you, stomping your slender face with their pricy shoes until these sad blue eyes will finally close and your big tear bags will release their heavy load of all those years into a dirty mélange of broken glass, ice cubes, shit, and fluorescent drinking straws. And the people, they will sing and scream and dance and have endless oral sex while dribbling their drinks on their white T-shirts that they already bought months ago for tonight's special occasion. And the light will change—it will be grayer and duller than any season known to mankind. Dancers without shadows or souls will move mechanically, leaving all these dispelled tribal campfire rituals far behind. And their mouths will be stuffed with white worms and white rotting body parts and they will squeak and they will scream, ‘Democracy, democracy!’ And they will punish, as they are punished: in total equality.”

The actor then spoke about a long relationship of his that ended very badly, but apparently he and she are on speaking terms after a long period of conflict and struggle. I told him that I have a girlfriend too and that it is not always easy for me. He told me to leave her and keep searching for true love. I thanked him for his advice and the drinks and went back to The Pig. I was filled with self-disgust and wanted to die. Whenever I see the actor's face on screen, I have to vomit. It's true.

The Pig was not known to be an empathetic character. With his harsh big body, partly covered with skin diseases, partly overgrown with strong black bristles, he seemed to be far from solidary care and understanding. But when I came back to him he put his hand on my shoulder to soothe my pain. The Pig was gifted. And he was right: I had to pull myself together and forget about the Land of Punishment and the white worms. I looked at him. We both knew that our evening wasn't over yet and that no second-league actor on earth could spoil this lakeside party for us. At that point I was deeply unaware that that also meant my "way" would change entirely and forever on this very same evening. And when I saw Julie for the first time, moving and dancing through the crowd toward us, I felt severe doubts about being right when I loudly and often claim that I always had been the way I am.

She was certainly the only person there who knew how to move her body. And it was not about body language at all. She was blonde. Her hair seemed to be still wet from a short dip in the lake's crystal clear water—maybe that's why she wasn't that red faced like all the other cows. Her hair was tied back tightly in a short ponytail. She was beautiful in her white blouse and her white trousers. She did not wear socks in her white suede slippers. I showed Julie to The Pig. The Pig agreed silently with my estimation that she was the most beautiful creature in this world. He grunted. He drank more. I drank more. And then we made our move. We approached the girl and she smiled at us. She could see that we were true. She could see that and smiled at us. We smiled back, or I smiled back, as it was pretty hard to tell if The Pig was smiling too. The music at that point had reached the peak of its brainlessness. Everybody was giving hand-up-in-the-air signs to the DJ, who was sweating and stuck out his pierced piece of tongue to roll it back into his mouth with crude facial expressions. The air. This poor air. All these lungs and tongues it had to pass at that beach party. It was inhaled constantly, blended with smoke and alcohol, sucked into deep holes and tunnels that kept bodies moving and hearts beating. Deep down in there it warmed up just to be exhaled again, joining the remaining pure night air now forever changed. Changed by things nobody but the air would ever see. It had stroked the DJ's tongue, it squeezed itself through the bleeding break-dancer's nose, it moved on to cool the sweating bartender's forehead, it found itself locked in between beefy lips desperately pressed to one another in a cramped kiss just to transport the filthy and bad words those very same mouths would send out shortly afterward to put things in order again.

We'd almost reached Julie and tossed away some of the white baboons who were trying to dance her up, swinging their hips in some referential system that neither me nor The Pig were very eager to be informed about. She was still smiling at us. One of the dancers did not agree to our plan. He was shouting at me in a language I could hardly understand—maybe it was a dialect, but I don't listen to dialects. I really wondered what he was yelling at me, what he was explaining with his nervous hands. Then he got distracted by somebody else who did something wrong and he went to speak to him, probably about the basic rules of having fun together. But now Julie was gone again. The Pig looked very angry about that fact and went after the teacher

to take him out. I stood in the crowd and I was touched by its warm, hot hands. The white shirts were soaked with sweat. I felt dizzy and confused. The Pig came back and gently pushed me toward the lakeside. We passed numerous bars. The glasses reflected the lasers, the spots, green and red lights. The Plexiglas counters were illuminated from the inside by white neon light tubes. The bartenders threw the bottles' metal caps into the trashcan on the other end of the counter. Behind each white bar there were white shelves filled with bottles shimmering in every possible color: red like oranges, blue like the coconut sky, brown like the Mississippi sun. Cheerful fluids flooded the sparkling glasses. These colors weren't from this earth and when I looked at the sparkling ice cubes, it hurt my eyes. But The Pig guided me and we didn't stop until we arrived at the lakeside. After the crowd's warmth, I felt the night's chill coming down on me.

Couples were holding each other in the dark. Smaller groups seated in beach chairs were talking and laughing. It was hard to walk through the sand and I stumbled and fell down. The Pig marched on, tired of guidance or tired of me or of the white people. The dark silhouette of his head kept moving from left to right and from right to left. For a moment I wanted to stay there in the damp sand and look at the lake's dark water licking the shore in small waves.

I got up and seated myself randomly with a group of laughing students telling jokes. I wanted to ask them if they had seen The Pig or Julie, but I stopped myself. It's a common phenomenon: You sit together at a lake in a fake beach volleyball court with your best friends and a brave and daring village brain comes by, sits down, and talks up that untouchable girl that everybody in the group's in love with. The group reacts as if they'd formed this inner circle right from birth. I'm always excited about how their tone changes from friendly questioning and beer offering until they confer and plans for the evening are made, neatly conceived with no possibility for me to join. I wanted to talk to them about the evening and about the reasons why they were here tonight and about where they came from. I wanted to tell them that I was also new to the region, visiting an old friend over the weekend. I wanted to say that I'd gone swimming three times that day and that it'd felt very good after the long train ride. In this group I would spare any remarks on travel costs, but I wanted them to know that trains might take longer but a train ride is much nicer than flying here, and that I couldn't concentrate enough on planes to even read the free magazines, and that I hated to board in ugly, remote places. And I wanted to cut out their tongues and hang them in a chain around my neck before they even could answer. I would take the tongues with me. But I couldn't handle my hostility or theirs and went back to the illuminated tents instead and stood in line for a drink for more than fifteen minutes. White men were jumping the queue. When it was my turn I ordered all I could carry, as if I'd bring the booze back to my crew waiting in the beach chairs. When I was given the drinks I told the bartender to eat shit.

In the biggest tent, where we'd discovered Julie, I stood aside and emptied two of my glasses. I looked at the dancers and again at the DJ. I felt as I always had felt—

my body felt ignored, my mind useless and bitter. I spotted Julie and The Pig swinging gently on the dance floor, dancing lightly and without any exaggeration. Calmly, they were moving their bodies to a tune nobody but them could hear. It looked good. At least to my eyes. I approached them and they smiled at me when they saw me coming. She was so fresh and even The Pig didn't look that bad. I still had four drinks in my hand. The Pig grabbed one, emptied it, and threw the glass far away into the dancing crowd. Then he gave one glass to Julie and kept one for himself. We raised our glasses and drank. And then we moved closer to one another and touched each other. We put our faces close together and started to kiss. The Pig had a long and hard tongue that licked Julie's face. Her tongue was soft and gentle like a child's tongue and it caressed my closed eyelids with its tip, slowly and tenderly, while mine tried to lick her neck. Our bodies touched. Believe me. I was there. Julie was there. The Pig was there. We wanted to stay. Please. But while we were kissing, I heard, still very, very far away, the noise of rolling thunder and the metal vultures' first shrill, blood-freezing screams of lust and pain. Believe me.

I had never been to The Pig's place before. The small apartment was decorated and inhabited as if The Pig were actually a shepherd with too much time on his hands. The wooden floor was covered with goat's leather and fluffy white sheepskins. In between the skins small trails had been left where the wood showed signs of heavy, routine usage. The walls were painted in different brownish tones, which made it look as if the whole place were dug out of the earth. To keep the illusion intact, on the second floor of that old building, he had painted over the window in the same brown tones. The brown walls showed rudimentary drawings of animals and hunting scenes, just like in the old cavemen's holes, but in between there were big numbers that reminded me of the ones on the back of some sportsman's tricot. The numbers were painted on the walls in a precise style, using different colors for the sharp outlines and the monochrome filling. They almost looked like graffiti. Then again the hunting scenes in between the numbers looked raw and unfinished and it was hard to tell what kind of animal was being portrayed. Spears sticking out of bodies, hinges broken and twisted, some creature trying to escape, heading toward a big yellow "53."

The Pig must have painted these walls long ago in order to settle into the place and it didn't appear that there were any changes made since then. I was slightly disappointed that The Pig actually had an apartment. I probably thought he would live in a prison cell and every time he would leave his habitat he would tear the metal bars out of the concrete walls. But the hardcore privacy of his actual space gave me comfort and I relaxed. Julie was not at all interested in the place. She smiled at us, her eyes wide open and awake, and did not say a word. The Pig burned some candles and turned out the light. We sat down on the sheepskins, facing each other in the candlelight. The room was quiet and went well with the late hour. There were no laser beams, no music, and no reason to feel too old or too young. It was nice to look at Julie and it was nice to look at The Pig. Our sexual appetite had slowed

down because of the change of environment and we just sat and looked at each other. As I sat cross-legged on that sheepskin, I somehow sensed that my sexual appetite especially had slowed down dramatically. My limbs felt heavy and stiff, my penis felt too soft even for pissing. My head would sink down to my chest over and over and it took more and more effort to bring it back up again to see my two best friends staring at me in silence. Somehow Julie's smile had gotten sour, or at least it was missing that fresh quality I'd adored. Maybe it was because she was looking at me, whose physical state clearly sabotaged our spiritual trio. It was now hard to answer her stare, also as I couldn't really control my eyeballs anymore—they were going in different directions. I thought it was tiredness or the liters of alcohol, but it felt stronger than that and I noticed an intense unknown smell around me. Possibly it came from the sheepskins, but it was something other than that greasy sheep smell. The two of them did not move at all, but they kept on looking at me, more and more pitiful. What was the misunderstanding, where did all the love go? And what was that rotten smell? To prove that I was up and ready for any possible sexual performance and to share my lust and longings with my two companions I started to get rid of my clothes. I struggled hard with my pants and my shoes, but my efforts showed no result and I gave up. I sat there resigned, with bare legs and my pants twisted around my ankles. My head kept sinking and sinking and that smell would just not go away—it was bitter and sweet at the same time and I could taste it too. I raised my head again to ask the others what this smell was, but I was looking into different faces than before. Not only were the smiles and tenderness entirely gone, these two unknown faces were completely different witnesses to my rather desolate and half-dressed state. I had never seen these creeps before in my life and it seems that they too would refuse to talk to me. I thought I felt my tongue moving, asking them what they were doing here, but the words just reverberated loudly and abstractly in my heavy head, which finally slid down to the floor.

Dreams followed, shapes and shadows were dancing and engaging with each other, the brown walls moved, faces of the crowd appeared, the endless murmur of the white party people came back, donating a soundtrack to vague indoor and outdoor scenes. Over and over I saw myself opening my pants. I was stuck in this movement, while around me the room turned into a foggy swamp and I saw a black gate whose doors were swinging in the wind. Vaguely I saw The Pig marching ahead, moving his head from left to right and from right to left. He vanished, then again waited for me and pointed in the direction of a pale horizon where more figures were bent over, moving cramped and painfully as if tortured. The old actor's face appeared. His eyeballs were replaced by sparkling ice cubes, his unshaven chin looked old and saggy, and I saw how the flesh was hanging from his red, scraped throat. The Pig reappeared to press the ice cubes deep back into the actor's skull, using both of his thumbs and all of his strength. He screamed at the actor with loud distorted words. Everything was moving; none of the figures remained steady.

I tried hard to open my eyes, as I thought it was already the next day and that I had to go. The brown walls with the drawings and the numbers came back briefly, the shadows and the candles got brighter for a moment, but then the space darkened again. The dreams and their figures were gone, the voices and party sounds fell silent. A strong feeling of shame and guilt replaced all those visual effects from before. I stared into the darkness and all there was was guilt. A very strong light started to flash. It lit up the scenery for a few seconds before it was shut off again. I could see that the brown walls were gone. A black fabric hung in the background and I saw Julie and The Pig lying on a pile of white fluffy sheepskins. The next time the light went on The Pig was lying naked on his stomach and Julie was sitting on his black-haired back, still wearing her white shirt but no panties. The light went out again and returned moments later to show me Julie driving her fingers through The Pig's thick black hair. She was stroking and holding his head with both of her hands. The Pig was relaxing and grunting. I saw the white sheep wool and I saw Julie's glowing blonde pubic hair in the harsh light of that merciless slide show. The light was shut off again. It didn't feel as if I was in the same room where the things I saw were happening. But I was so close, my vision was sharp, everything was so sharp. The next time the light came back on, Julie, white as white can be, was still stroking The Pig's head with her left hand. Then her hand formed a fist searching for a good grip in the black hair. The Pig's body tensed and his hairs stood up as Julie began to cut his throat slowly with a bread knife. Mad bubbling sounds followed, The Pig's last gasps tuned in with the generously flowing blood. After working hard on the backbone, Julie smiled proudly and finally held the heavy head up with both hands to show it to me, moving it gently from left to right and from right to left. The red blood spilled all over the white sheepskins. Before the light was switched off again I thought I saw something like a smile on The Pig's face. But maybe I just wanted to see something of a smile, of a morbid but sexual relief or some it's-better-this-way-shit in that big face loosely stretched over a smeary pumpkin of a head. Deep inside I knew that he was gifted and he wanted to live. I will miss him forever only for that. Nobody switched the light back on. In that darkness I couldn't make out where Julie might still be sitting on the hairy back of The Pig, holding his cut-off head, nor where I was, lying with my pants wrapped around my ankles, paralyzed, unable to stand up and run away. I breathed calmly, listening very carefully for all possible sounds in the dark. With my remaining senses sharpened by blindness I was waiting for the tiniest acoustical information to reach my ears. It felt as if years had passed when I finally heard something and it was the first time in my life that I was addressed with a military order.

OPTIMUNDUS  
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