

Right: Vaporetto ferry run aground in flooding, Venice, November 13, 2019. Photo: Andrea Merola/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock.

Opposite page: View of “Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys: *Mondo Cane*” (A Dog’s World), 2019, Belgian pavilion, Venice. From the 58th Venice Biennale. Photo: Nick Ash.



PRO TOOLS

DIETER ROELSTRAETE ON JOS DE GRUYTER AND HARALD THYS'S POSTHUMAN HUSBANDRY

AT NO TIME has the ever-widening gap between Art and World been on more dramatic display than in rain-ravaged Venice this past November during the fifty-eighth edition of the Biennale, dubiously titled “May You Live in Interesting Times.” The most poignant and lasting image to have come out of this most recent iteration of the global art world’s favorite tourist attraction may well be that of a helpless vaporetto—emblazoned with Biennale advertising—run aground due to flooding near the Giardini boat stop. A sobering sign of “interesting times” indeed, and a far cry from one of the 2019 event’s most emblematic works, installed at the far end of the Arsenale: the delirious brave new world of zeroes and ones conjured by Ryoji Ikeda in his rapturous *data-verse 1*, 2019, an immersive video installation collating visual information sourced from CERN, NASA, and the Human Genome Project, among others. Blissfully free from the paranoia that now unavoidably complicates any mention

of data, it may well be the last major work of art to present the global infoscape for “mere” visual pleasure. The disembodied mirage of the technological sublime’s weightless glitz on the one hand, and the fact of sinking cities and freak storms on the other: It is tempting to think of these terms as the two sides bracketing our cultural moment’s defining chasm.

Elsewhere at the Biennale, however, a searing commentary on this very chasm could be found in the dystopian menagerie of hapless androids crowding the triumphant Belgian pavilion project “*Mondo Cane*,” 2019, by the staunchly analog, defiantly Luddite (and not terribly eco-conscious) Brussels-based duo Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys. Their installation reminded us that many of the mechanics involved in bringing the apocalyptic vision of artificial intelligence to life are (and will always be) truly, mind-numbingly stupid—that is to say, of the demonic idiocy that has long been the preferred province of the







Left: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, *The Knife-Grinder of Wexford*, 2019, mixed media, dimensions variable. From the 58th Venice Biennale. Photo: Nick Ash.

Right: View of "Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys: *Schmutzige Puppen von Pommern*" (Dirty Puppets of Pomerania), 2015, Power Station, Dallas.

Below: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, *The Rat Woman*, 2019, mixed media. Installation view, Belgian pavilion, Venice. From the 58th Venice Biennale. Photo: Nick Ash.



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artists' twisted imaginations. (The colloquial meaning of *tool* comes to mind.) The duo's thirty-plus-year career, initially rooted in the do-it-yourself tradition of grainy 1980s video art, has gradually focused more on sculpture; their loyal followers might have been taken aback by the uncharacteristically high (i.e., "pro") production values of "*Mondo Cane*," but its folksy automatons, which populated the pavilion in a manner reminiscent of a musty, underfunded ethnographic museum, are only the latest in the long line of dolls and dummies, disheveled droids and mangled mannequins that has been haunting de Gruyter and Thys's oppressive microcosms for decades. (I have been writing about de Gruyter and Thys since the mid-2000s, first in an essay in which I proposed a reading of their practice informed by what I termed "kuklaphobia," or a type of pathological fear of dolls, those archetypal sites of the Freudian uncanny. Elsewhere, I have considered the artists' eerie puppetry from the perspective of the crisis of communication and Fredric Jameson's "Prison-House of Language," silence being a mannequin's preferred patois.)

In the middle of the pavilion's light-flooded main space, a neatly arranged, cordoned-off cast of nine robots took turns mechanically performing menial tasks such as knife sharpening, organ playing, knitting, pot-making, rolling pizza dough, spinning yarn, zither plucking, and painting. (The artists are always keen to remind the viewer of the many anachronisms and archaisms that continue to undergird popular

conceptions of artmaking. Their American institutional debut, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in August 2015, likewise revolved around the persona of a painter.)¹ A visitor's guide identified the figures in question, complete with bios and origin stories with gothic undertones: *The Knife-Grinder of Wexford* ("as he sharpened, the Knife-Grinder of Wexford always whistled the same tune. . . . still whistled to scare children in the dark"); *Ilse Koch* ("In October 1938 the Koch family and young Ilse were out in the streets cheering the arrival of the German troops"); *The Swiss* ("the victim was stupefied by his gaze and the melody, and became a helpless puppet in The Swiss' hands"); and *Irmgard Speck* ("It has been calculated that in her lifetime, Irmgard Speck must have spun around 400,000 kilometers of yarn—the distance from the Earth to the moon"), among others. Their visages are a uniform, deadpan Caucasian, and their nifty outfits mark a distinct upgrade from the lumpen abjection so characteristic of earlier de Gruyter and Thys—designed humanoids and hominids such as the *Schmutzige Puppen von Pommern* (Dirty Puppets of Pomerania), "sculptural revisionings of the descendants of an executioner family from Greifswald," which were shown at the Power Station in Dallas in the summer of 2015. The overall impression at the Belgian pavilion was equally primitivist, as was the dismal sense of isolation in which these robots go about their repetitive, mindless business of *Dasein*.

The exhibition's title, "*Mondo Cane*" (A Dog's





Far left: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, *The Rat Woman* (detail), 2019, mixed media. Installation view, Belgian pavilion, Venice. From the 58th Venice Biennale. Photo: Nick Ash.

Left: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, *Madame Legrand*, 2019, mixed media, dimensions variable. From the 58th Venice Biennale. Photo: Nick Ash.

Above: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, *The Yellow of Ghent*, 2005, video, color, sound, 10 minutes.

Below: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys, *Flap and Flop*, 2019, mixed media. Installation view, Belgian pavilion, Venice. From the 58th Venice Biennale. Photo: Francesco Galli.

World), is borrowed from the 1962 Italian exploitation classic, also known in the US as *Tales of the Bizarre: Rites, Rituals and Superstitions*, which helped spawn the “shockumentary” genre. Fenced off by blindingly white steel bars, the rooms surrounding the central tableau housed groupings of slightly more malevolent-looking characters. The most lugubrious among them was *The Rat Woman*, a “harbinger of Death” who tapped her cane at regular intervals, though Stasi member *Ernst Wollemenger* and *Madame Legrand*—the latter “an essential tool in the detection and deportation of every living Jew in Paris and its environs,” who, curiously, resembles an ’80s-era curator—likewise made a memorably macabre impression. In fact, an entire essay could be devoted to untangling the artists’ ongoing obsession with the cliché equating anything Teutonic sounding, or tied up in twentieth-century German history, with the idea of evil in the “mature” European imagination (that is to say, their own). De Gruyter and Thys’s stubborn insistence on giving their evil characters Germanic names, or giving their most misanthropic works German titles (as in their videos *Das Loch* [The Hole], 2010, *Der Schlamm von Branst* [The Clay from Branst], 2008, and *Triumph des Willens* [Triumph of the Will], 2015, after Leni Riefenstahl’s cinematic ode to the Nazi aesthetic), infused these works with a historical shade of horror. Their approach is also comically nostalgic, recalling the slapstick of a 1975 episode of *Fawlty Towers*, made notorious by the





Think of the exhibition as a Surrealist parody of an Amazon fulfillment center, in which a Roomba would not have been out of place.

repeated admonition “Don’t mention the war,” in which Basil, played by John Cleese, can be seen goose-stepping before a group of German tourists dining at the sitcom’s eponymous dysfunctional hotel. Indeed, if anything dates the moral universe of these artists—as children whose parents were born before or during World War II—it is this knowingly Pavlovian deployment of Nazi lore as both the quintessential signifier of the human capacity for malice and the last resort of avant-garde art’s historical attachment to the tactics of scandal and shock.

Entering and exiting the pavilion in Venice, the visitor was greeted on both sides by three other caged creatures: *The Fool* (“has a mental age of around eight”) and the droll duo of *Flap and Flop*, who looked an awful lot like the artists themselves, down to the beige bathrobes that de Gruyter and Thys wore in their 2005 video *The Yellow of Ghent*. None of these latter figures are automated: Their stilted stillness leads one to quickly scan the floor for an unplugged cable. In fact, animation is restricted to those characters inside this bizarre menagerie who perform actual *work*, no matter how dreary or dull. (It seems telling,

in the scheme of things, that the immobile *Flap* and *Flop* are deemed useless.) When seen against the backdrop of a Biennale so enamored with the grand promise of tech, “*Mondo Cane*” appeared like a reverie on the future of (manual) labor, long unthinkable without the specter of automation hovering overhead. Think of the exhibition as a Surrealist parody of an Amazon fulfillment center, in which a Roomba would not have been out of place.

Some critics have cast the project as a sardonic interrogation of the ancient, hallowed principles underpinning European culture—“Belgian duo Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys are sending the [*sic*] Europe’s idealized archetypes to jail,” declared a writer on *Artnet* soon after the Biennale’s opening—for which the entwined notions of art and the museum, of course, constitute one cornerstone. This criticism strikes me as misguided, even somewhat disingenuous, as does the artists’ own suggestion that their motley crew of antiheroes appears trapped in the looping habits of a dying patriarchal society it is unable to escape—not to mention the claim that they are taking aim at the slow obsolescence of many age-old arts and



Opposite page, top left:
Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys,
Avion Radiocommandé
 (Radio-Controlled Jet), 2019.
 Illustration from “*Mondo Cane*”
 (A Dog’s World) catalogue, 2019.

Left and opposite page, bottom:
 View of “**Jos de Gruyter & Harald**
Thys: Objects as Friends,” 2018,
 Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New
 York. Photo: Lance Brewer.

Right: **Jos de Gruyter and Harald**
Thys, *The Fool*, 2019, mixed media,
 Installation view, Belgian pavilion,
 Venice. From the 58th Venice
 Biennale. Photo: Nick Ash.



crafts (art being the most prestigious among them).² If their archaic, bare-bones predecessors are often charged with affection, the automatons gathered here speak of a perverse *love*—the love of everything dying and obsolete that these quaint curios stand for, of the blissful quiet of these figures’ very objecthood. After all, “Objects as Friends,” 2010–12, is the unironic, programmatic title of de Gruyter and Thys’s major series of abject still-life photographs, which propose that the lifeless world of inanimate matter is a home like, if not better than, any other. The hapless denizens of “*Mondo Cane*” are lovable because they represent the comforting and soothing scenarios of artificial *stupidity*, not intelligence: Finally (*phew!*), here are a bunch of machines we *don’t* have to be afraid of. If this most ambitious formulation of de Gruyter and Thys’s is meant to conjure the droning drudgery of a local folk museum, it may be because these are the museums the artists love, and feel more at home in than, say, the New Museum or a revamped Museum of Modern Art. And if “*Mondo Cane*” is read as a paean to a declining, vanishing Europe and its dying crafts and customs, the question arises as to where

the artists’ cultural allegiances and emotional attachments lie—a very welcome (if discomfiting) question in the current climate of eager thought-policing, which has taken on a knee-jerk, automated nature all its own.

It would be foolish to think that the relative breeziness and lighthearted humor of “*Mondo Cane*” signal the end of the darkness that for thirty years has propelled de Gruyter and Thys. This maddening crowd of dolls, mannequins, puppets, and robots notwithstanding—and despite the gradual disappearance of people from their work—it is the peculiarly inhuman condition of human beings that continues to preoccupy the artists, which is why theirs will never be a pretty picture. Indeed, why does every crudely drawn face in the suite of pencil drawings “*Les énigmes de Saarlouis*” (The Riddles of Saarlouis), 2012, for instance—surely one of the artists’ starkest, most skeletal statements—remind me of a murderous pedophile’s malignant mien? Simply because murderous pedophiles are people, too? In 2009, de Gruyter and Thys embarked on a series of four-hundred-plus pared-down, forensic pencil drawings “made in a

basement in Brussels,” which were last shown at the Kunststhal Wien in 2014 under the galling title *Das Wunder des Lebens* (The Miracle of Life). Some of the more disturbing images in this exceptionally bleak inventory of contemporary life depict “a disguised man undressing a woman,” “a man holding a naked woman other men watch and take pictures,” and “a brutal man sticking his finger into the mouth of a woman with a bow in her hair”—all modeled after the netherworld of amateur porn, known for the general ugliness of its male “actors.” And while I’m on this unsavory subject, to return to my opening remarks regarding the perennial analog-digital chasm in art: It is clear that de Gruyter and Thys’s work would be inconceivable without the gift of the internet, with its singular penchant for randomly bringing out the worst in humanity. Call it the “triumph of the ill,” if you like, but it makes for piercingly great topical art. And, more troubling still, for great comedy too. □

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For notes, see page 235.

NOTES

1. *Im Reich der Sonnenfinsternis* (In the Empire of the Solar Eclipse), 2010–11, now in the collection of the MCA Chicago, is an installation comprising two-hundred-plus paintings ascribed to a steel stick figure named Johannes, the fictional protagonist of the accompanying twenty-six-minute video, *Das Loch* (The Hole), 2010. The paintings, made by de Gruyter and Thys in the course of a couple of weeks in 2011, are provocatively, jarringly ugly—crude, infantile, and poorly and hastily made—a sensibility echoed in *Das Loch*'s preposterous cast of polystyrene characters, which are dressed in haggard outfits (naturally, the artist wears a beret) and communicate via a monotonous disembodied computer voice-over. A viewer's malaise can partly be assuaged by reducing the work to a reflection on the eroded mythology of artishood. Indeed, lurking behind the sophisticated facade of its performance of "bad" painting is perhaps the more unsettling dread that this—capital-*P* "Painting," the tried and tested royal road to capital-*A* "Art"—is the exact type of art that de Gruyter and Thys were always dreaming of making, a suspicion strengthened by surveying the singularly wretched watercolors (some choice titles include *A Stube in Berchtesgaden*, 2015, and *Venus as a Peasant*) that made up the aptly titled "Fine Arts," their 2015 exhibition presented at CCA Wattis and MOMA PS1.

2. "Of their 20 puppets in Venice—which are, for the first time, robotized—several are trapped in a loop, unable to escape the 'old patriarchal "safe" society, with rules that are no longer valid,' say the artists (who speak as one). The dedicated workers of lost Europe are locked in but busy: there is the chef, the seamstress, the musician, and the knifegrinder, propped as figures of the lost past so championed in the West." Kate Brown, "Peer Inside the Prison of the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and See a Disturbing World of Mannequins and Old White People," *Artnews*, May 7, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/belgian-pavilion-venice-1536859>.