

INTRODUCTION

THE WORLD ON ITS HEAD

DE WERELD OP ZIJN KOP

AN EXHIBITION OF

CONTEMPORARY BELGIAN ART FROM FLANDERS

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Jan Hoet — Director of Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent (Belgium)

Plato has taught us that our view of the world is in a way the shadow of God—that what we see is the reflection of an all-encompassing abstract idea. Today, we realize that our perception goes beyond our ability to think and develop ideas. We are aware of the fact that codes can be twisted and turned, and when that happens, our perception changes. We can think of very simple examples. Certain primitive tribes who did not know the concept of the mirror used to tattoo each other. When they discovered the mirror they started tattooing themselves instead of their friends or relatives. This tendency is symptomatic of the fact that the notion “we and the others” is slowly disappearing; the feeling that we recognize ourselves in another and recognize him or her as an autonomous personality is fading away. People start to become more and more focused on themselves. In this age in which the Internet is omnipresent, we become aware of the fact that we can no longer control “the other,” whether this “other” is another person or textual information, because all that is outside us has become overpoweringly big and massive. This incites me to say that we should once more open ourselves up to the phenomenon of chaos. We should once more be susceptible to the creative energy of chaos and not only to the appeal of order and organization. Numerous artists enjoy chaos and see it as a new opportunity to address the increasing distance between object and subject.

Today, spirituality has become a vague and unclear notion because we no longer allow it to be part of our everyday lives. It now has something to do with memory; culture has to do with the act of remembering something and making the decision to use that memory in a personal and productive way. Spirituality needs to be approached in a similar way. It used to be something that—in the guise of religion—was forced upon us. Today, people—and especially artists—try to develop their own personal way of dealing with what is spiritual, without relying on a theory or doctrine. They use reality as a starting point, and have a strong intuition about what is going on in the world,

but they twist, turn, and revert elements with which we are familiar in order to transcend those everyday phenomena.

The artificial transformation and deformation of what we know of nature and reality are two of the constant elements in contemporary art. One can see it in an extreme way in the work of Matthew Barney, but also in the work of the young Belgian artist Honoré d'O. For *Over the Edges*, a site-specific project that was organized by S.M.A.K. in the city of Ghent and that consisted of more than 52 interventions in public space, d'O created an installation of a number of crystalline marbles suspended in the air with transparent wire. The marbles suddenly popped up and disappeared again, reflecting the city and the surroundings in their surfaces (see last page). This minimal intervention had a maximal effect and did not cease to amaze and bewilder people who suddenly saw the world condensed, upside-down in a small, barely visible sphere. The marbles were regarded as small enigmas, precious objects that made us aware of the immediate reality that surrounds us all.

In this respect, Honoré d'O's work is inscribed in a long tradition of Belgian artists who use strategies like camouflage, imitation, and travesty to reveal the true nature of reality which is not discernible to those who only focus on what is visible and immediately apparent. Rene Magritte did it by turning the world upside down in his paintings; Wim Delvoye does it by merging elements that are seemingly incompatible and by re-using traditional media like stained-glass windows and mosaic in an unusual way. Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven and Christine Clinckx do it by presenting a male-dominated society through a female perspective.

All of these examples illustrate the fact that art always has to do with iconoclasm, with deconstructing and reverting what is old and traditional or familiar and everyday in order to turn it into something new. Iconoclasm is often perceived as a negative attitude. Those who disrupt what exist, who "turn the world upside down," are seen as vandals who are only interested in destruction. That iconoclasm can be the result of a positive impulse, of energy so powerful that it sweeps obstructions away, is often ignored. Belgian artists today, and artists in general, refuse to wander around in the wood of icons that has been created by tradition; they agitate against it. But at the same time they formulate an open and positive proposal which is aimed at change and progression. At first it might seem as if they are only interested in making the everyday dysfunctional, but it is clear that this is just a means to reach a new kind of transcendence.

Karen Moss — Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs, San Francisco Art Institute

Shortly after arriving at the San Francisco Art Institute in fall 1999, I learned of an unusual opportunity to bring a group of Belgian artists to San Francisco for an exhibition and series of public programs. Although I had spent time in Belgium previously, I had not been there for many years and welcomed the opportunity to travel to Antwerp, Brussels, and Ghent to see some artists I knew and others I had only read about. When I made my first trip at the beginning of 2000, I found an incredible range of intriguing work which could not be codified or classified into any specific type of artistic production. The nine artists selected for the exhibition—Christine Clinckx, Carl De Keyzer, Wim Delvoye, Honoré d'O, Jan Fabre, Ann Veronica Janssens, Mark Luyten, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, and Angel Vergara—do, however, share a more general affinity for the conceptual and the perceptual, each possessing an uncanny ability to find their own lucid vision in the midst of cultural chaos.

It is hard for most Americans to imagine the very complicated nature of Belgium, which is a conglomeration of divergent cultures, languages, and geopolitical factions. Including Flemish, French, and German-speaking territories—remnants of the Hapsburg dynasty—the country was constructed in the post-Napoleonic period. Today Belgium is a very complex intermingling of disparate cultural, linguistic, and economic conditions. There are more than six different governmental bureaucracies, some of which are determined by affiliation with a particular cultural community, rather than by politics. Add to this the fact that Brussels, the bilingual capital, is becoming the seat for many activities of the European Community, and one can imagine even greater bureaucracy and convolusion chaos.

This notion of the chaotic nature of life in this region far precedes the construction of the country of Belgium; it is part of the Netherlandish literary and artistic tradition. In 1618, the Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder painted *Flemish Proverbs*, a series of village scenes continued by his son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger (see page 13).

At first glance, this painting appears to be a rather typical genre scene filled with vignettes of everyday human activities; but upon closer scrutiny, one recognizes odd details that are visual representations of ninety-two peasant proverbs. For instance, rounded pastries placed upon rooftops refer to the English saying “pie in the sky,” while a small inverted globe above a doorway (illustrated on page 13 represents the Flemish notion of “de wereld op zijn kop”—“the world upside-down”—signifying the chaotic, topsy-turvy nature of life and the futility of rational order in an irrational time.

The exhibition title, *The World on Its Head*, derived from the Flemish proverb, seems particularly appropriate, for it alludes to this chaotic, bifurcated nature of Belgian culture. In spite of living in this fractured and sometimes even fractious context, the nine artists in the exhibition use their own keen perception, sense of humor, and ironic wit to see clearly through the chaos and make sense or reveal aspects of the “upside-down” world they inhabit. Like the individual activities of the peasants in Brueghel’s painting, each artist finds his or her own vocabulary and mode of artistic production, including photographs, sculptures, video, digital projection, and installations.

The World on Its Head does not posit a single theme or construct, or presume any unified aesthetic or ideology; rather, it represents nine very distinct artistic sensibilities. While some are young, emerging artists, others have exhibited their work since the 1970s. All of the artists have exhibited extensively throughout Europe, and many have participated in biennials or other major international exhibitions; however, only two have shown their work previously on the West Coast.

For this reason, we are particularly pleased to present *The World on Its Head* in the Walter & McBean Galleries, and site-specific projects in other spaces around the Art Institute. The accompanying activities include critiques and interactions with Art Institute students and public lectures by visiting artists. Additionally, Jan Hoet, the Director of the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent and Johan Pas, an art historian and critic based in Antwerp, will present lectures on the art historical context of contemporary art in Belgium. Because of the complexity of this subject and my own limited exposure to the work, I am very grateful to Jan and Johan for contributing their respective preface and essay in this catalogue. It is my hope that this exhibition and publication will provide much-deserved exposure to this group of extremely talented and thoughtful artists.

Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564–1638)
Flemish Proverbs oil on canvas, 123 x 164 cm
Collection of the Rockoxhuis, Antwerp

