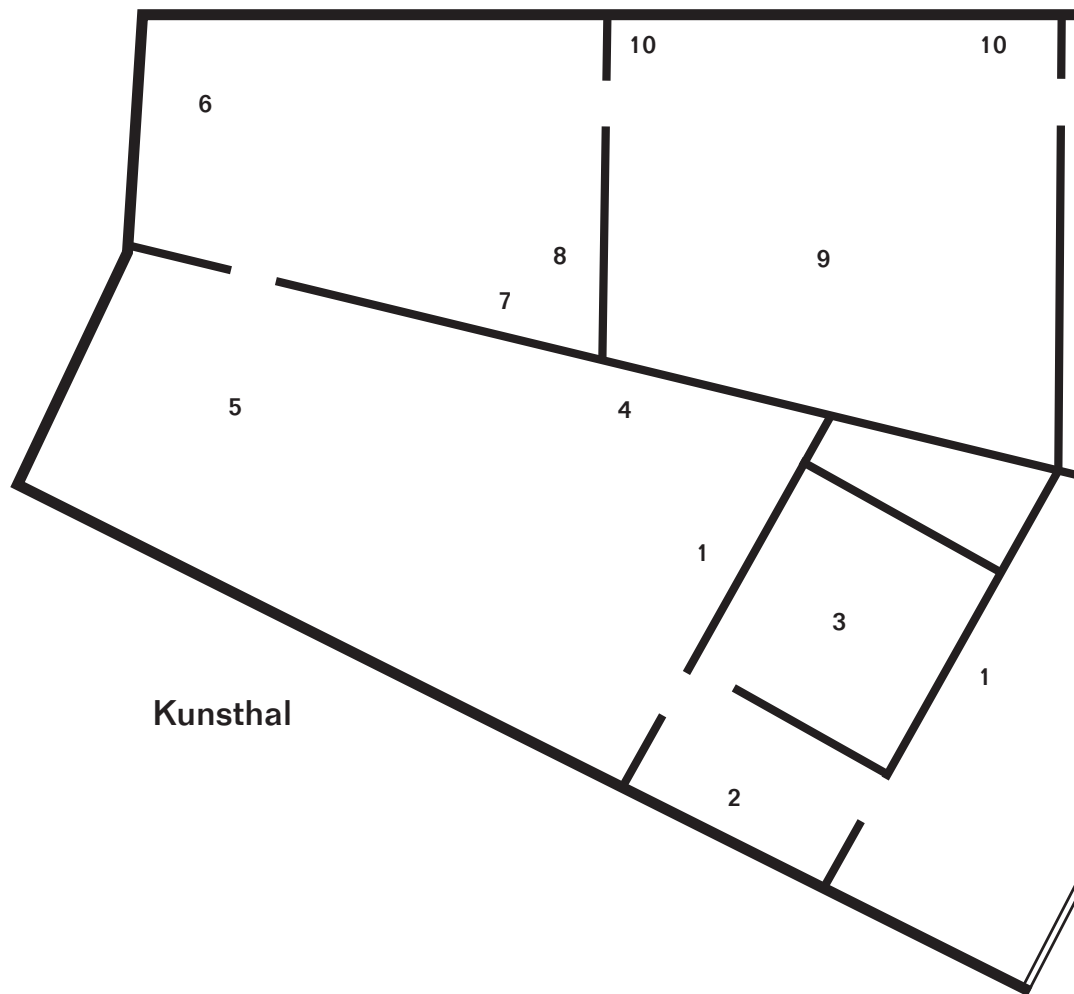


Cross-examinations #3

These and Other Works. Explaining Belgian Art to a Foreigner

With contributions by: Liudvikas Buklys, Jacques Charlier, Jef Cornelis, Thomas Crombez, Wim Cuyvers, Daniel Dewaele, Chloé Dierckx & Liesbeth Doms & Sarah Hendrickx, Filip Francis, Lara Mennes, Willem Oorebeek, Karl Philips, Marc Schepers, Henri Storck, Sarah Vanagt, Roland Van den Berghe, Wilfried Vandenhove, Stefan Wouters, a.o.

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Daniel Dewaele (°1950, lives in Ghent)

- 1 **Art Against Apartheid, 1977**
- 2 **24.800 +51.122,43 sqm sculptures, 1977-ongoing**
- 3 **Art and Society, 1982**

In 1977, Dewaele marched alongside anti-apartheid protesters in Antwerp, carrying a placard that read 'Art Against Apartheid'. The message pitted the fiction of art against the reality of apartheid, asking insidiously whether that fiction could be channelled or rewritten into becoming an institution, a political instrument, or – perhaps more accurately – asking how many people would be required to this idea so that art, undefined and impersonal, can effectively oppose apartheid. As Johan Pas notes, the solitary Dewaele among the demonstrators seemed anomalous, balanced between an absurdist undermining of 'the artist' in the wrong place, and the radicalization of an uncertain position within capitalist politics. Also in 1977, Dewaele initiated a campaign where he addressed letters to museum directors, asking them to indicate how many square meters in their institutions would be available to his project, which he defined as "sculptures the size of which corresponds completely to the space: the empty space in which the public can move in complete liberty. The result of all the gathered data of surface ... is equal to the realisation of a large accessible sculpture work". The sixteen replies he received between 1977 and 1979 were presented under the title '24.800 sqm sculptures'. Following Pas once more, the letterheads of the various institutions and the signatures of the museum directors served to articulate the institutional context with which the work entered in dialogue. Taken up again in recent years, the project – the collection of letters and the corresponding size of Dewaele's spectral sculpture – grew considerably. The same conceptual protocol is deployed once more to chart the ongoing geographic expansion of the art world, the ways in which museums operate and are thought of in recent years.

"The alienation of the artist from society and of society from the artist can only be resolved by having a concrete dialogue and an activity within the direct social context of which the museum and gallery are only one part", Dewaele has said. This reflection probably motivated the project 'Art and Society' (1982), an ambitious effort to document the mindset of the contemporaneous art world. Under the heading 'Art and Society, Are there solutions?', the artist sent a question-

naire to 450 artists, critics, art historians, gallery owners and museum curators. They were invited to state their opinion as to: "IS THERE A RUPTURE BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF ART AND SOCIETY? IF YES, WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR THIS? IF NOT, PLEASE COMMENT". The 69 responses vary from irritated comments to generous attempts to formulate an answer to Dewaele's troubling, but purposefully abstract questions. The reactions were grouped in a book published in 1985, preceded by a lecture-performance at ICC Antwerp and re-enacted, in a different configuration, for the present exhibition.

Chloé Dierckx (°1990), Liesbeth Doms (°1989), Sarah Hendrickx (°1990, they live in Antwerp)

- 4 **General Provisions, Application Field, 2012**

The three artists present two related projects, under the common title 'General Provisions, Application Field': a request to the city of Antwerp for the organization of the event and the provisional result of an ongoing conversation with the Antwerp Police Department, revolving around the Police Codex – the manual of good practices published and applied by this institution.

Inspecting closely the artists' proposed event, its map and its possible poster, we come to realize that the 'content' of the artists' proposal is not an artistic manifestation, but the definition of the entire social life of the city during one day as a single event, bringing together the anonymous actions and topographic folds that constitute the public domain. It is the event of everyday uneventfulness that the artists propose we reconsider: the inconsequential gesture, the mundane and the trivial, and all the larger 'issues' these unrecorded routine actions carry with them. The proposal also tests the limit of bureaucratic formulations: while nothing in the protocol of requesting to organize an event does not in principle discourage such a proposal, the same language of bureaucratic exchange cannot accommodate an application of such magnitude and unclear purpose.

A convergent investigation takes aim at the more ambiguous paragraphs in the Antwerp Police Codex, where insufficiently defined notions such as 'social pressure', 'normality' or 'unacceptable behaviour' allow the insufficiently regulated use of force on behalf of those in charge of maintaining order, while they also encourage the art-

ists to engage in an exuberant exercise of mis-translation, interpretation and illustration. What the artists propose to the Police Department is the joint publication of an illustrated Codex, where the purposeful abstraction and strategic gaps in the document are paired with enigmatic diagrams, conscientiously measuring the acceptable amounts of 'pressure' or 'abnormality' and testing the universal validity of these notions.

Lara Mennes (°1982, lives in Antwerp)

5 Studies for an Open Chapel, 2010

In Maaseik, in the easternmost part of Belgium, one finds the Willibrordus chapel of Aldeneik – the oldest chapel in the region. In spite of its historical importance, the chapel is closed and left to deteriorate. After being refused entrance to the chapel, Lara Mennes decided to take photographs of the interior through the keyhole. Right outside the religious edifice, on the former graveyard surrounding the church, she built a minimalist model of the chapel, featuring the five interior shots printed on Plexiglas. Attached overhead and slanting towards the viewer, the panels in 'Studies for an Open Chapel' both reconstruct and empty out the transcendent experience of being surrounded by stained glass windows. The open installation and its proximity to the inaccessible chapel documents lay bare the social and devotional function religious buildings are assumed to embody. Dislocated from its safe, ornate interior space, ritual architecture comes close to a simple geometry of social and moral conventions, while Mennes' open chapel points towards other possibilities of communality.

Marc Schepers (°1952, lives in Antwerp)

6 Research and (re-)construction of: L'invention du monde, 1983 - 2012

Over the last decades, Marc Schepers has undertaken one of the most consistent practices of hybridizing art and radical politics. Via numerous initiatives he organized with a diverse cast of local and international collaborators, the questions of art, society and their exchanges were insistently addressed. Between his early exploration of the photographic memory of Borgerhout to his current projects – Ruimte Morguen in the South of Antwerp and the Venstergalerie/ Window Gallery in the socially troubled area of Linkeroever,

between being one of the founders of the magazine *Kunst en Revolutie/ Art and Revolution* and the long-term initiative *Het Onding Kunst/ The Art of the Useless Thing*, Schepers has been a determined proponent of the idea that we look again at political commitments and artistic agency, at the possibilities of change and the reasons for stasis. As opposed to an archival *comptendu* of these various engagements, Schepers' formal intervention at Extra City revisits his 1983 'L'invention du monde' and functions as another proposal that we look again, intently. Attempts to materialize the discrete structure of a perceptual shift, the installation registers all the light variations in the space it occupies, and situates at the center of this exploration a manifestation of a dimly perceived outside: the shadowy profile of a city. The outside then becomes the kernel of the inside, in a beautiful reversal of spatial coordinates. The many urgencies that can be imaginatively associated with these coordinates, in their social or political dimensions, are presented under the harmless, muted guise of volumes and lights. Quoting an Islamic architecture treatise, Schepers describes the installation in these terms: "If the visible world originates from light, then illumination becomes an image of the world."

Henri Storck (°1907 - †1999, lived in Oostend)

7 On the edges of the camera, 1932

8 Houses of Misery, 1937

For 'Sur les bords de la caméra', Henri Storck returns to a process first employed in his 'Histoire du soldat inconnu'. In one of the earliest uses of found footage, he cuts and reassembles fragments of newsreels from the year 1928. The effect is less solemn here than in 'Histoire...', a film with a more pronounced political bend. 'Sur les bords de la caméra' brings together crowds and policemen, politicians and arsonists, sea lions and gymnasts, riots and music halls, in a dizzying and sometimes comical examination of the body and the collective. This is a collage of what seem like discarded scenes – discarded because of their dangerous, potentially farcical effect, corroding the solemn narrative of progress. Realized in 1937 and filmed by Eli Lotar, formerly active as Surrealist photographer in the circle of Georges Bataille and as collaborator on Luis Bunuel's 'Las Hurdes'/ 'The Land Without Bread', Storck's 'Maisons de la misère' is a fictional documentary. In an impoverished Walloon

neighbourhood, the filmmaker created characters that perform, in the absence of any visible emotion, a traumatic world of social ailments: the overcrowding of homes, extreme deprivation and ill-health, evictions and the terror of money-lenders, survival and sporadic acts of solidarity. Storck described the film as “a reportage authentically constructed by means of a series of acted scenes. I think it is useful, even fruitful, to closely combine documentary and drama in this way”.

Roland Van den Berghe (°1943, lives in Amsterdam)

9 Queen Missile, 1968-1973

10 Documentation of ‘Our Friendly Bombs’ – Guernica New York, 1972

Departing from an inquiry into the power of and over images, Roland Van den Berghe took mass-media images of Fabiola, Queen consort of Belgium between 1960 and 1993, and composed seven portraits. Smaller reproductions of these striking pictures were offered to prominent Belgian artists and intellectuals, such as Emil Christiaens, Marcel Van Maele, Fred Van Hove and Ernest Mandel, as templates to be colored in. The result is an array of explicit or implicit critical reactions, resulting in two episodes of censorship, a cancelled exhibition at the Casino in Knokke and a mock judicial proceeding against the artist. Van den Berghe continued the project of democratically opening up iconic images and making them available to public inscription by including a template portrait of cyclist Eddy Merckx alongside Queen Fabiola and publishing the reproductions in Belgian and Dutch periodicals, like Humo, Spécial and Openbaar Kunstbezit, between 1971 and 1973. Readers were invited to color the portraits and return them to the artist. When some Dutch readers preferred to keep their drawings, Van den Berghe staged an impromptu performance in their apartments, inflating there a rocket-shaped balloon whose size and uncontrollable twitches caused commotion at the domiciles of contributors. In the words of critic Barbara Reise, “the association of famous Belgians’ images, however politically controversial, is far less important in this work than the every effective creation of a network in which ‘art’ and ‘ordinary people’ – as well as ‘extraordinary people’ – can actually and directly participate’.

Complementing the presentation is a photograph

of an action organized by the artist in 1972: ‘Our Friendly Bombs’ took place at the Museum of Modern Art and at the Whitney in New York, and revolved around the leitmotif of a bomb/ boomerang hybrid form, here held by participants against Picasso’s ‘Guernica’. The intervention equates obedience with civic self-destruction, and denounces the transformation, under the patronage of the museum, of Picasso’s protest into an object of bourgeois piety.

Jacques Charlier (°1939, lives in Liège)

11 Zone absolue, 1969-1973

12 Documentation of performances by Group Total’s, 1967

The late 1960’s were characterized by a dichotomy of economical growth and frenzied industrialization on the one hand, and a purist, nature-oriented reaction to it on the other. Jacques Charlier captured this ideological chasm in a manifesto, picturing a world drowned in concrete – a “savage and radical solution to the problems of habitat and circulation”, aiming to fully train the middle class in the art of fabricating and working with concrete, so that the communal life, ruptured in the artist’s city Liège by redundant traffic arteries that were to express economic prosperity, would re-form in the collective act of pouring concrete over highways and canalizations, monuments and folkloric statues, water courses and streets, of fanatically erecting barricades on top of barricades, surrounding a protected ‘green area’, a non edificandi center. This cruel utopia manifested in a dialectical model (the ‘Zone Absolue’ begun in 1969) with two adjacent plots of land of identical dimensions, one of which was to be fully covered in concrete, the other with vegetation. Left to entropic action, both zones would deteriorate and fuse which each other. A conceptual equivalent of this work was realized in the Liège art space A.P.I.A.W. in 1970. The show also contained two overlapping projections, one of a performance Charlier did on a coalmine landslide near Liège and one of slides taken by his colleagues at the Provincial Technical Service, a municipal division of public administrative works.

Another chapter in Charlier’s contribution to the exhibition is the documentation of several action of the group Total’s that the artist initiated, active from 1965 to 1968. Among the many disruptive, ironical actions undertaken by this loose cast of participants, the presentation highlights

the group's participation to an anti-atomic demonstration in Brussels in 1967, where they branched a large transparent flag. This iconic image allows the triple reading of a refusal of nationalism, of a support on which a potentially endless number of political demands can be inscribed (and erased), but also of a slight visual perturbation in the cityscape, via the flutters of translucency when this anti-flag is waved in protest.

— Works from the collection of Martine d'Argembeau and Nadja Vilenne Gallery.

Jef Cornelis (°1941, lives in Antwerp)

13 Interview with Jacques Charlier, 1972

13 Building in Belgium, 1971

'Bouwen in België', a documentary realized by Jef Cornelis in collaboration with Geert Bekaert as scriptwriter, shows two distinct architectural tendencies. Firstly, an old, organically developed, disorderly assemblage of dwellings and improvised infrastructural solutions. In pronounced opposition to this sits a monstrous depiction of modernist urbanism and commercial advertisements. The city is no longer occupied, but occupant. Cornelis and Bekaert propose, in guide of a solution, a humanist, non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian approach to architecture, departing from a given landscape and particular needs, made functional by and given over to real people. The documentary was produced as part of the television series 'Waarover men niet spreekt' ('What is not said out loud'), and responds, within the installation, to the urbanistic discussion proposed – in different but convergent terms – by Jacques Charlier. On the same monitor, an interview with Jacques Charlier by Cornelis is presented. It was filmed in 1972, when Charlier was employed at the Service Technique Provincial of the Liège municipality and was presenting the technical photographs taken by his colleagues there into the art context.

Karl Philips (°1984, lives in Brussels)

14 Renault Trafic, 2011

Karl Philips' 'Renault Trafic' project began as an inquiry into the distant history and current sociology of the Bois de Boulogne near Paris. The park was given its present shape by Napoleon III in 1852 and rose to art-historical prominence with Manet's 'Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe'. Nowadays, the park is a place for leisurely strolls but

its darker recesses shelter outcasts, sans papiers and drug addicts. After sunset the park turns into a notorious place for sex tourism, for which the place and the emblem is France's cheapest delivery van, the Renault Trafic. Rows of identical white vans are parked along the walking paths – Philips continued the process by parking three more vans, 1983 model. The artist punctured the tires and supported the wheel axes with stones: this immobilized the vehicles and lent them a sculptural character. The doors were welded, rendering the vehicles unusable. This project manifests a different relation to the social outcast, standing at a remove from other instances in Philips' practice where he provided ingenious shelters for the homeless on the back of large advertising panels. As opposed to the logic of mending social ills and divides, 'Renault Trafic' might be about monumentalizing them. How can we think, within the tropes of the monumental genre, of a class of the dispossessed and evacuated, that lives outside the norms that structure the symbolic formation and negotiation of monuments? Perhaps as multiplicity – three identical 'monuments' as opposed to one –, and as obstruction or obstacle, as opposed to the transparency and sense of belonging inscribed in monuments.

Thomas Crombez (°1978, lives in Antwerp)

15 A selection of works by Guy Bleus.

Hugo Roelandt, Ria Pacquée, Danny Devos, Jan Fabre, Koen Theys and Dirk Paesmans

Where is the history of performance art to be found? Is its history located in the remnants and documents of its events? Or rather in its stories and histories, collected in books or interviews? How is performance history to be told, re-told and re-imagined? The challenge of this project by art historian Thomas Crombez is to draw a new map of a fragment of Belgian performance history. That fragment concerns artists who became active during the late 1970s, and produced their major works in the following decades: Guy Bleus, Hugo Roelandt, Ria Pacquée, Danny Devos, Jan Fabre, Koen Theys and Dirk Paesmans. The works selected for this exhibition document a significant artistic impulse. Each artist takes bold steps to re-negotiate the 'social contract' of the performance, sabotaging the expectations of the audience and the organizers. In this way, it could be said that all conditions for the theatri-

cal event are made explicit, all theatrical effects are eroded, and only the 'degree zero event' of performance as such remains. Performativity itself – the simple fact to perform for an audience, with all the other relationships this implies – is reinvented.

Presenting these works through 'relics' in showcases would have implied a devotional attitude, as if the unrepeatability of the performance event could only be approached through the prostrate adoration of its material traces. The strategic choice made here was to reformat the works for the public domain, where the original performances took place and resonated.

Stefan Wouters (°1972, lives in Brussels)

16 Research on the happening 'Bezette Stad', 1965

Paul van Ostaijen's book 'Bezette Stad' ('Occupied City', 1921) refers directly to the occupation of Antwerp by the German army during the First World War, and indirectly to the linguistic and cultural liberation of Flanders. More than fifty years later, in 1965, Wout Vercammen and Hugo Heyrman took a cue from this text to occupy Antwerp again, with poetry and slogans – as well as, from an art historical perspective, to create Belgium's first happening. They invited local writers to mark words in public spaces: photographic slides were taken of these inscriptions in view to project them at a later event at the AMVC (currently Letterenhuis). Partly to promote this event, Heyrman and Vercammen, together with the Japanese artist Yoshio Nakajima, conducted a happening on the Groenplaats, addressing various themes which revolved around (nuclear) military aggression. Vercammen's poster for these events refers directly to the work of Van Ostaijen through its title and its use of an expressionist typography.

This research display includes Vercammen's poster, previously unseen pictures by Frans Neels of the writers in action, film footage of the Vercammen-Heyrman-Nakajima happening on the Groenplaats, as well as the book by Paul van Ostaijen, the model used by the performers in testing the politically emancipatory potential of language.

Filip Francis (°1944, lives in Brussels)

17 Ultra-Communication Machine, 1971

18 Scores for Tumbling Woodblocks, 1975

19 The Biggest Written Number of the World, 1973

From the artist's diverse body of work, the presentation focuses on three interrelated threads: preparatory drawings for his 'Ultra-Communication Machine', the scores for tumbling woodblocks, whose domino-like, calculated instability is rendered as a provisional moment of geometric perfection, and the different forms in which the artist tested the notion of a limit to the act of painting.

The limit is the figure that unites these distinct endeavours. It appears here as the field of peripheral vision, linking canvas to model, and painting to that which is not painting. It resurfaces as breached separation between two human beings, set within a situation of un-impeached communication, or as the metaphorical edge between the play of falling blocks and their architectural or apocalyptic connotations. In addition, a photograph presented here (1992) belongs to a body of work that materializes the edges of visibility, manifested in both canvases that record the distorted impressions of peripheral vision and photographs that document the ways in which the acts of painting and of looking can become both perceptually and symbolically disengaged. In the photograph, Francis paints within a purposefully constructed situation of not-seeing, from a position where he cannot control the outcome – and the mastery this outcome could demonstrate -, but only the instruments that explore a space between painting and non-painting. Another work is the only surviving fragment of a large-scale, ephemeral painting whose purpose seems to have been to short-circuit the different times of work: putting the most effort into the shortest-lived image. This is a section from the largest number ever written, and sequence of '9's painted by Francis in 1973 on the walls of a recently built commercial building near De Keyserlei, for an exhibition that preceded the inauguration of the shopping gallery.

— Works from the collections of Flor Bex & Lieve Dedeyne, Bernard Blondeel and Stephan Peleman.

Wim Cuyvers (°1958, lives in the Jura, France)

20 letter to the curator, 2012

Liudvikas Buklys (°1984, lives in Ghent)

21 the scene (with Spilliaert), 2012

Willem Oorebeek (°1953, lives in Brussels)

21 Séance BLACKOUT (London Couch) III, 2012

Two non-Belgian artists have been invited to react to what is, at least chronologically, the exhibition's foundational enigma: 'The Death of Leopold II', drawn by Léon Spilliaert in 1910. Spilliaert did not make explicitly political work, or work occasioned by political circumstances, or work that lent itself to an immediate reading, so for these reasons alone, this drawing is an irreconcilable exception in relation to the painter's oeuvre. Then there is the ambivalence of the work itself, the inability to decide whether this is an instance of cosmic irony or mystical abandon, the deflation of elaborate Symbolist language into deadpan practicality – by which signs become functional props, and Spilliaert's taste for perspectival play is reduced to a straightforward separation between dead king and faceless, mourning subject. The scenography intersects the Belgian tricolour as blanket and the Congolese star as backdrop in a rudimentary – by the painter's standards of sophistication – allegorical landscape. The drawing's ambivalent deployment of political emblems and the unclear symbolic act consumed here, the combination of domesticity and celestial cataclysm reinforce the work's secret and fuel the two responses to it presented here.

Liudvikas Buklys intensifies the connotations of domestic space and art-historical obscurity by designing a humble surface, a decidedly improper holder for a reproduction of the drawing. This inadequate display condenses – and translates materially, via its awkward height, temporary position and irritating dysfunctionality – a complicated relation to the image it holds up to our scrutiny. The fact that 'something is amiss here' is told within a perfect economy of means, as if only a fully elucidated image, transformed into a serviceable art-historical narrative link, can aspire to 'proper' presentation. The drawing awaits explanation in its uncomfortable position, and we are left to wonder which are the 'proper' meanings that could be wrested from such a work. In guide of an explanation, Willem Oorebeek contributes a work from his ongoing series of 'Sé-

ance BLACKOUT (London Couch) III'. The obscured picture is counterbalanced by an empty white space, functioning in a sense like an ink-blot and a void speech bubble, or like an absent picture described in illegible script. This layout for the unexplained opens the path of projections and dark drives, an invitation possibly reinforced by the reference to 'couch' in the title. The London sofa could be any, or a particular one. This description comes from the website of the Freud Museum in London: "The room contains the original analytic couch brought from Berggasse 19 on which patients would recline comfortably while Freud, out of sight in the green tub chair, listened to their 'free association.' They were asked to say everything that came to mind without consciously sifting or selecting information. This method became a foundation upon which psychoanalysis was built." Our distance to the death of Leopold II and the birth of psychoanalysis allows perhaps the momentary superimposition of the two images: perhaps what is deplored in Spilliaert's drawing is the lost possibility of the king's stream of consciousness, his complicated story unravelled in freely associative manner.

Sarah Vanagt (°1976, lives in Brussels)

22 After Years of Walking, 2003

After the genocide of 1994, the Rwandan government temporarily suspended history from the school curriculum. The characters in Vanagt's 'After Years of Walking' find themselves in an uncertain zone between the old history and a new one. The trigger for this renewed historical questioning is a film made by Belgian missionaries in 1959 and not presented in Rwanda for many decades, as the Hutus seized power right after the film's production and dethroned the Tutsi king who had commissioned the work. The filmmaker came across this forgotten production in a Brussels archive and screened it in various locations in Rwanda in 2002, provoking stupefaction among both villagers and university students, but also looking for an entry point into the Rwanda's search for lost, or corrupted history. In a place where national history has always been a contested subject, and where artificial ethnic distinctions have both validated political predominance and led to massacres, the hyperbolic cosmogony in the film and its propagandistic deformations, imposing a political pattern on social and tribal relations, provoke bitter re-

flections in Vanagt's Rwandese interlocutors. A fraught relation to a programmatically obscured past is documented in meticulous, sensitive cinematography.

Wilfried Vandenhove (°1970, lives in Borgloon & Mexico City)

23 La Rumorosa, 2011

Center and displacement are thematized in this expansive – and engulfing – photograph, both indebted to and veering away from the tropes of documentary photography. Working predominantly in Mexico over the last few years, artist Wilfried Vandenhove takes the water-pumping facility at La Rumorosa as a point where sinuous historical and geopolitical lines intersect. We see a lot – desolate, scorched emptiness – and very little: nothing of the nearby village, or of El Vallecito, a treasure trove of artefacts, cave paintings and petroglyphs left behind by the Kumeyaay population, who inhabited the area since 8000 BC. We are right next to Tijuana, a place of grim social statistics, where drug and human traffic are violently conflated: the landscape 'behind' us is Mexico, while the one inhospitably extending ahead is Arizona. Settling for this depopulated scene, and for the immediate opposition of the unwelcoming sublime expanse and the diminished 'figure' of instruments and receptacles for water extraction, the photograph evokes a whole range of external references – the vicissitudes of nature, history and contemporary politics, all in the meditative suspension of looking into the desert.

— Work from the collection of Koen Van den Broeck.

