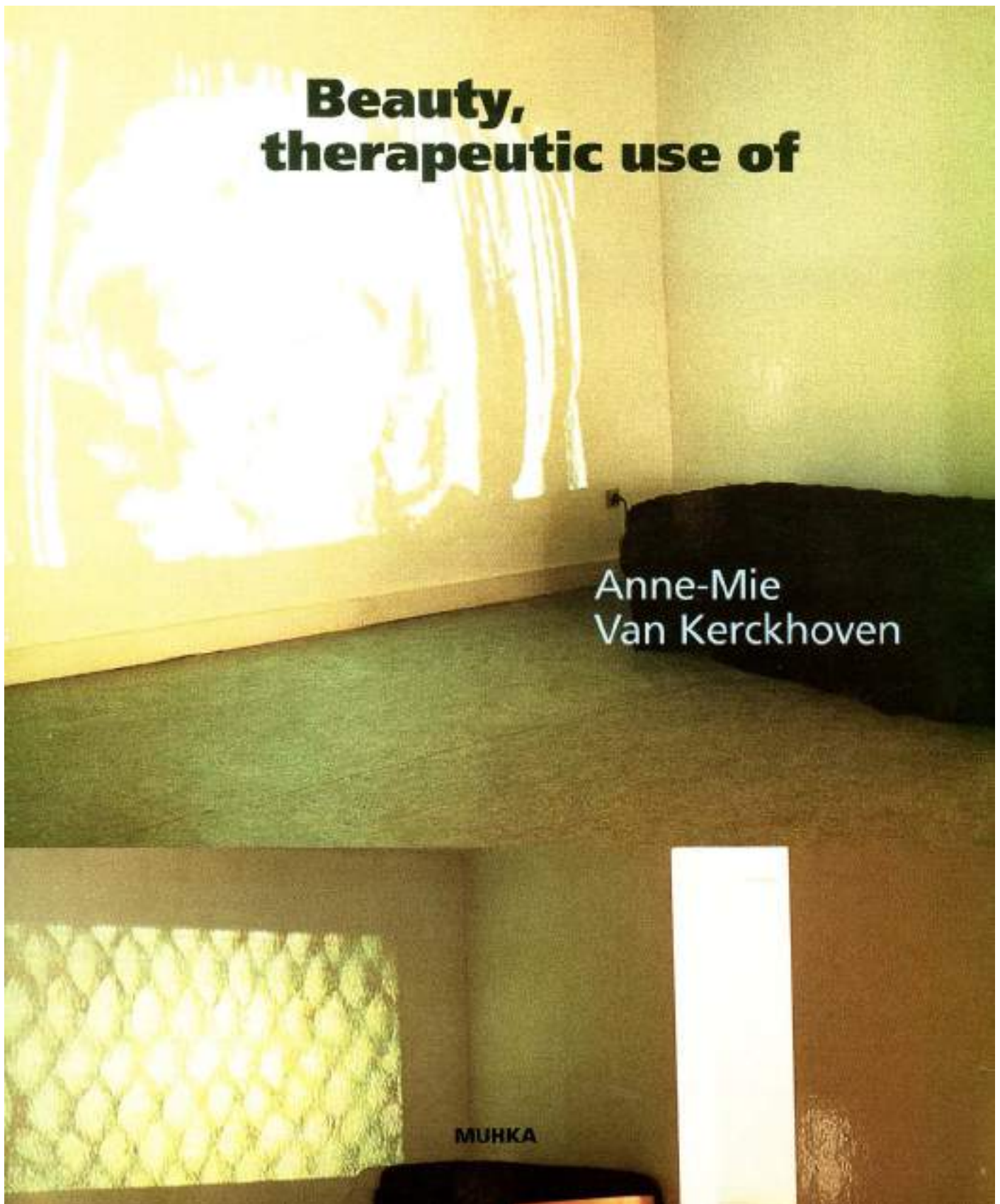


Catalogue: Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, 'Beauty, therapeutic use of', Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst MUHKA, Antwerpen (BE), 26 June – 12 September (1999).



A Sex and Technology Project

Ronald Van de Sompel

*"Cause when love is gone, there's always justice.
And when justice is gone, there's always force.
And when force is gone, there's always Mom. Hi Mom !"*
Laurie Anderson, O Superman, 1982

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven's oeuvre looks at the obscene from a female point of view. Since 1995, the artist has been working on an extensive project in which images of women play a key role. The successive phases of the HeadNurse project go back to a database of pictures taken from the "naked women press", dating from the time before the so-called sexual revolution. These pictures were meant to meet men's need to look at women in different stages of "undress".

To understand the popularity of this phenomenon, we might ask ourselves what pornographic pleasure consists of. The traditional intellectual will invariably trot out some dull and repetitive explanation. It is the generally accepted view that pornographic transactions do not hold any seductive attraction at all. But Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven makes use of the stereotypes of this language - the attributes, the glances, the gestures, the camera angles - to build a spiral of seduction, or better, a reversal of the model of seduction. In an essay in which she views pornography as an interesting modality in the arts, Susan Sontag points at the hidden relationship between the themes of desire and death. She refers to Georges Bataille's literary oeuvre, in particular to his Histoire de l'Oeil, published in 1928. In Bataille's research, which is aimed at exploring the field of transgression, the extremity of the erotic experience is at the basis of vital energies. The fact that Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven dedicates her Morele Herbewapening (Moral Rearmament)(1996) - the first section of the HeadNurse project - to the goddess Baubo strongly suggests that she too is convinced that real human sexual gratification is only possible in a context in

which openness is carried to extremes, thus making room for excess. The obscene goddess who sees through her nipples and speaks with her vulva, would dance so provocatively that all depressive and melancholic women were filled with joy once again. The installation Morele Herbewapening is Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven's attempt to fill the spectators with joy in a similar way.

Many people try to cheat their own feelings; they are open to pleasure, but they try to keep terror and horror at a safe distance. According to Michel Foucault, the practice of imprisonment is no more than a ritual of exclusion aimed at controlling the contre nature, the bestiality of man. To silence it in a repressive way, the Other is housed in a transparent place where it can be recognised and controlled. That is what happened to woman, who was originally barred from the domain of philosophy. She was locked away in herself and reduced to a receptacle of evil.

In 1962, Michelangelo Antonioni made his film The Eclipse, about the end of one love affair and the beginning of another. Monica Vitti plays the part of a woman who is torn between her love for two men, and searches for a fundamental truth behind the attraction. In 1994, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven made an installation of the same name in which a video is projected onto a wall and a soft noise coming from under a bed turns out to be Charles Mingus' song Eclipse. Using computer animation, shots of Monica Vitti are combined with fish from the Antwerp Zoo. In prehistoric myths, the appearance of the fish as phallus anticipated the substitution of goddesses by male gods. The installation also comprises a slide projection, in which words from the jargon of psychotherapy are alternated with pictures of interiors. Each sequence of an interior and a word is followed by a black slide in which the remnants of the two fuse together and slowly disappear.

Interiors are a constant throughout Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven's oeuvre. As Filip Luyckx points out in his text included in the present catalogue, to Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, the interior has long been synonymous with a situation of isolation and social alienation: a place where she could not feed on images from the outside world, with the exception of her distant observation of the professionally organised feasts that were held in the hotel where she spent her youth. In this isolated situation, her imagination could feed only on pictures from magazines and the scenery of the surroundings.

The notion of the interior has always played an important role in bourgeois aesthetics. Thus, the concept of 'good taste' implied that the living room was not really conceived as a private room, but rather as an externally-oriented, representative room, in which women were assigned a decorative role. As certain functions of the family were increasingly placed outside it, the intimacy of family life became a central issue. It is common knowledge that by situating the focus of women's activities in domestic life, women were also expelled from economic life.

The emergence of domesticity probably is one of the most striking developments in the history of the family. The humanists were the first for whom 'living' lost its self-evident nature. The house became the centre of one's personal life, a microcosm to be cultivated, composed according to a model of concentric circles of which the degree of publicity decreases from the periphery to the nucleus. The separation between private and public life became so strictly applied to the division of the rooms and their accessibility for the two sexes, that men and woman came to attribute different meanings to the notion of 'home': privacy for men, isolation for women.

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven does not take a moralising stand. As early as the eighties, fed by a distrust of the social conditions to which contemporary art is subject too, her images and colours, texts

and videos already contained an aggressive nucleus, hovering on the verge of nihilism. When, in 1981, she founded the association Club Moral together with Danny Devos, she wanted to show the uncompromising and the rough, the extreme and the radical, that which is only barely acceptable and permitted. But she was also convinced that it was not their task to pass judgement on what they showed. In that sense, the activities of Club Moral and her oeuvre joined in with the punk movement that emerged as a provocative subculture in the second half of the seventies and took on massive proportions in no time. Just like the meta-ironical attitude of the punks – not to be reduced to a look and a musical style, but related to a way of life and a political awareness –, the activities of Club Moral seemed strongly inspired by the ideas of Dada and the détournements of the Situationist International. On the one hand, they organised activities in which they opposed the autonomous power of subculture to the heteronomous power of spectacle, and on the other hand, they depreciated this spectacle by using distorted fragments from the prevalent language – the house of power. In reference to the Dead Kennedys, whose song California über Alles came out in 1979, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven made two exhibitions entitled Komfort über Alles (1980-81). In the period that followed, it was also common practice during openings of her exhibitions that the performances of Club Moral provided additional hypnotic effects by means of sounds and recitations.

Without indulging in any kind of euphoria, we can say that at the end of the nineties, contemporary aesthetics and arts are more than ever embedded in a metropolitan technoculture. In post-industrial society, the classic humanist opposition between art and technology seems to have made way for a sometimes far-reaching alliance between cultural and technological processes. No-one will be surprised to learn that the asymmetric differences between the sexes manifest themselves more clearly in male-dominated technologies such as the Internet and virtual reality. Nevertheless, in *Cyberfeminism with a Difference* (1999), a text available on a website on the Internet, Rosi Braidotti suggests that there is a need to return to so-called 'inferior' literary genres such as science-fiction and cyberpunk. At the same time, she argues that science-fiction stories often address fundamentally male fears, projected onto alternative possibilities of human birth and reproduction. It is no accident that the central computer that controls the spaceship in the film *Alien* – a classic in its genre – goes by the name of 'Mother'. The computer appears as an omnipotent generative force with an evil nature, as a metaphor for an unrepresentable abyss that is the source of all life and death. According to this author, the thesis that the male death urge is reflected in cyberpunk literature may even be understood as an understatement.

Generally speaking, it is perhaps true that the imagination displayed in the artistic production in the context of technoculture seems rather meagre. Apart from the fact that the metaphor of war pervades our cultural and social imagination, the qualitative shift and the widespread impact of pornography in all spheres of cultural activity are impressive. In this respect, the rise of the so-called new technologies goes hand in hand with the repetition of the most hackneyed themes and stereotypes. And yet, Rosi Braidotti thinks that the loss of the humanist ideal can only be solved by dwelling on it at length, by inscribing this loss and the resulting ontological uncertainty into the 'dead heart' of contemporary culture. Seen in the light of post-modern conditions, artistic activity can be conceived as a permanent process of translation and a succession of adaptations to different cultural realities.

In the nineties, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven has naturally evolved towards multi-media art. The fact that her approach is everything but nostalgic is clear from the way she deals with the complexity of

these 'new technologies'. An important part of her work consists of computer animation. A selection of this work can be accessed on the website she designed for herself: HeadNurse@TheOffice.net. One of those projects is *Die Loreley* (1994), a portrait gallery that leads visitors through Heinrich Heine's eponymous poem via a personal interpretation of love and melancholy. Even before the Internet existed, the artist already tried to make her work interactive and, analogous to the many levels of information on the Internet, she exhibited her work in layers. In *Re-Pain* (1999), an advanced computer animation with references to ambient art, layers of organically-transforming colours and shapes are superimposed. By this process of slowly changing drawings, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven constructs a technological landscape. These layers show a marked resemblance to the composition of the soundtrack, in which samples from *Blade Runner* (1982) – the famous film by Ridley Scott, based on Philip K. Dicks' novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* – are separated from their background and combined with sound sources from her direct environment and samples from her earlier videos. Perfectly consistent with the images, the soundtrack activates a sensual dream world in which the manifestation of an extraordinary reality seems to have been copied from an erotic and unconscious experience. In her creative appropriation of sounds, which matches the mood of the depressed antihero in the film, and the rainy surroundings in which he is forced to hunt for 'replicants', Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven succeeds wonderfully well in maintaining the melancholic tone that subscribes to a sense of loss.

The title Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven gave to the second last section of the *HeadNurse* project also is the title of the exhibition accompanying this publication: *Nursing care, in melancholy stupor* (1999). Paradoxically, this hints at a desire to mould the future to her will without giving in to a nostalgia for things that have gone forever. In Rosi Braidotti's above-mentioned text, the author illustrates how the image of the caring, feeding mother is an obstacle to women's self-realisation. The lines that follow the fragment from Laurie Anderson's *O Superman* (1982) quoted in the beginning of this text seems to confirm this: "So hold me, Mom, in your long arms. In your automatic arms. Your military arms. In your electronic arms."

To conclude, we would like to remark that the therapeutic attitude propagated by Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven meets with little approval in the context of standardised art criticism. Recently though, there seems to have been a change. For want of philosophical or scientific solutions for the crisis of humanism, the discourse of art criticism has started to take recourse in the domain of ethics too. Going back in time, we can say that Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven's therapeutic aspirations are in accordance with Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas as he phrased them in *The Gay Science*: "Had we not approved of the arts and invented this kind of cult of untruth, the realisation of the general untruth and falsehood which is currently provided to us by science would have been absolutely unbearable." In the incomplete development of the *HeadNurse* project, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven gives us a chance to take a break from ourselves. ■

An Ethical View on an Aesthetics of Virtue

Koen Raes

The Melancholy Revolt of Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven

In cultural psychiatry, the second half of the twentieth century is scientifically recorded as 'the age of melancholy'. Over the last thirty years, the number of depressions has grown, especially in young adults. And these depressions appear to have their roots in a profound disappointment due to unfulfilled expectations, the disintegration of role models, and insecurity about the place of the self in the world. People wander about, lost, in a world that gives the impression of no longer understanding itself. Melancholy is the look of dashed hope, the realisation that the promises that were made will not be kept, but that they are still beautiful, nevertheless; the awareness that the values are confused and may even have lost their meaning, but that they are still values, nevertheless. The melancholic finds himself in the no-man's land from where he can look back on the ruins of the many claims to truth and justice which this century has formulated, and look ahead in a world that has deconstructed the principle of hope, yes, even made it seem preposterous. The melancholic is a vulnerable human being who experiences the vulnerability of things, and who approaches the injuries that have been inflicted with tenderness and care. There is so much coolness, loneliness, isolation. There is so much indifference. There is so little willingness to empathise and so much complacency. Don't people see the injuries? Wounds are there to be healed, but is there a point in healing them? And does one see which wounds were inflicted? And are they seen as wounds? Cannot beauty be discovered in wounds too? And should we not, first and foremost, show respect to all those who bear the scars of the times, rather than turn them, in a new project of hope, back into instruments of that which transcends them? The melancholic outlook on life is situated on the dividing line between the optimistic outlook of the moderns, in which so much seemed possible that the contemporary world was radically neglected, and the pessimism of the fin de siècle, that wallows in the feeling of meaninglessness and powerlessness. It is situated between the idealistic though strict disciplinary purity of

Language, communication, concepts and understanding, speaking and slips of the tongue, saying and withholding, showing and hiding, expressing and suppressing, that is what Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven's work is all about. Because not only are things going wrong in the world, but also in the ways events are interpreted. There is too much fragmentation, too much isolation, and there is too much complacency in that fragmentation. The gulfs that divide science, art, spirituality and morality from each other are too deep, and for that reason, their approaches of the world are imperfect. They lack a language - and the interest - to communicate with each other and thus bridge the gap. What's more, sometimes it seems that the refusal to engage in a dialogue is cultivated like a credo that is supposed to protect the integrity of one's own field. To science, art is supposed to be 'outside world'. And vice versa. This pseudo-comfortable isolation is radically challenged and contested by Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven. She is continually trying to join elements from different systems of thought to each other in order to break through their closeness. Maybe we would have been able to understand more about the world if those closed systems had not wanted to explain so much from their specialised perspective. Maybe it is precisely that specialist non-speaking with the other that is the cause of the prevailing malaise that is making us all *mal à l'aise*. It is no coincidence that she named her 'thought station' Club Moral. Because hasn't ethics always been an attempt to cut sections across all systems to offer an answer to the question of 'mother, why do we live?'. Has ethics not been too much the excluded other in science and in art? Has that not been the cause of the dehumanisation of knowledge and technology and of the alienation of the modern arts?

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven tells stories. Autobiographical stories, stories about her age, about the ways that age is now being experienced and the ways that experience is talked about. And she does that with images. Layered images. Daring images. Colourful images. Images that linger and won't let go, as if they were archetypes that have sprung up from the subconscious. Images that, in her work, turn out to be palimpsests that often started off as porn pictures. Porn, one of the products of sexual liberation, in which the female body is reduced and made into an object of male desire. Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven does not judge. Her gaze is more one of fascination with the power that women exude, even where they are reduced to mere sex objects, instrumental wares.

So, images of women. Beautiful women, strong women, wounded women, seductive women, ecstatic women. Women who, like the goddess Baubo to whom she dedicated *Morele Herbewapening (Moral Rearmament)* (1996), look through their nipples and speak with their vulva, and who succeed in overcoming their depression caused by their reduction to an object precisely by proclaiming that erotic objectification with all the more joyfulness and provocativeness.

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven is not a nihilist or a pessimist, nor is she a nostalgic. The optimistic experience of the moderns is not foreign to her, and nor is rebellion. But it is a melancholic rebellion, filled with the awareness of vulnerability. Her work is first and foremost analytical, rather than an attempt at an all-embracing synthesis. What needs to be done first is to dissect with extreme precision, to discover the damage that was done and the values that prevail. Because our senses are affected. In her *HeadNurse* project, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven expresses that analysis in five stages, which are each expressed by a series of images and a series of words. The instrumentalisation, encapsulation, disciplining, and suppression (of the female body) are first charted, before investigating ways of overcoming these processes by controlling them. And that presupposes that values are understood as immanent and not transcendent, as qualities that live in the world itself and do not belong outside it, whether they are epistemological, aesthetic, or ethical. A virtuous person radiates truth, beauty and goodness at the same time, interiorises the project of the *ens bonum, verum et pulchritudum convertuntur*. To attain this, however, one can no longer rely on one single prefabricated philosophy. All of them are too much in shreds for that. They have insufficiently understood

the contemporary world for that. But neither does one have to start from nothing, as the modernists could still think. Our history and our culture offer enough points of application for those who are willing to look. Even though they may be in pieces. One should not treat those ruins of truth and of true justice with nostalgia or distaste, but constructively mobilise them in a project of reconstruction, a 'nursing project' that heals and builds.

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven is fascinated by the female body and by the desires it arouses... and undergoes. It stands as a metaphor of what the world does to people. It stands for our culture, for our being. For woman is also the link that connects past, present and future. As a source of fertility, but also as a source of tenderness, concern and sympathy, of caring and sharing. But women's lib has not only brought woman - and therefore also our culture - freedom from the straitjacket of traditions and role models. It has also, due to an utilitarian frame of mind, instrumentalised women - and our culture - to a very large degree. In the seventies, the question of meaning was reduced to a question of utility, to the question 'what is this for?' And whatever could not prove its usefulness was sacrificed on the altar of the urge for liberation.

That happened to women too, who saw their sexual liberation filled in mainly on the grounds of male ideals. That is why Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven wants to fix the male gaze on women and transcend it by appropriating it. As a weapon and as power. Because the female body is about power, as the source of power and as the object of power. Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven explores eroticism, as a field and as a promise of infinite possibilities, for untapped opportunities for regaining an identity. All too often, the modernistic liberation led to new disciplinary measures in the name of purity, truth, health, or science. Against the terror of spontaneity, the terror of the diet, the terror of sexual education, she goes for a new playfulness, a playfulness that both does one good and is good, in the sense of virtuous, and in which the confusion brought about by the shattered role models is taken as a creative starting point.

For the sexual is the tension itself between that luscious fragrant garden of extremely differentiated and excessive desires and that orderly ground of sexual and social role models. In that sense, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven certainly does not turn her back on modernism. Rather, she asks us to start it anew, but this time with the knowledge we have now. But then without the striving for absolute purity, because precisely this striving made modernism totalitarian and pretentious. No longer the experiment for the sake of experiment, innovation for the sake of innovation, destruction for the sake of destruction, but instead, the creation of beauty for the sake of that beauty for and in the world. Morele Herbewapening must certainly not be understood, in that sense, as a conservative plea in favour of a moral revival. Rather, it is an attempt to mark off a new track, against such a revival, a track that leads away from the spurious contradiction between a repressive and disciplinary ethics of obedience and an anarchic, violent amorallism, and a track that rehabilitates Eros. Eros as a virtue that can be practised virtuously and that does one a power of good. As a value that is internal to the erotic practice. It is probably no coincidence that Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven closes her HeadNurse project with reversible models of seduction in which the therapeutic value of beauty is investigated. Beauty and virtue, aesthetics and ethics, can be integrated in each other and do not necessarily have to be opposed.

This theme recurs in her installation *De 5de Kracht (The 5th Force)* (1989). Here, it concerns a space where different moral survival systems coexist in time and space, so that one gets an ethical - and therefore - total picture of what usually determines our behaviour and thought, consciously and unconsciously, as modern westerners. The fifth force, beside gravity, electromagnetic force, and strong and weak atomic force, is, in the end, nothing else than the force that makes all that lives feel connected. One could call it the religious or the ethical force, which, in spite of all the chaotic structures, still suggests the possibility of a unity. Against the principle of 'divide and rule', which, according to Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, mainly legitimises the principle of rule, she suggests a 'thinking-in-connection';

which recognises the 'ethical pull' in us. (This happens to be a central theme of feminist ethics, which reacts against the blind worship of autarchy for the sake of autarchy.) The point is not only to be original, but also to recognise the relational network in which that originality was given form. Everything is connected to everything else, and one can probably live with the illusion of being an independent nomad, but it is no more than an illusion. "You cannot do without the other." It sounds nearly like a cry, though it is uttered by an artist who also expresses loneliness in her work. And even abandonment, and sometimes, despondency and spleen, because Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven is clearly also a wounded person. It could be different. There should be more attention and care for the larger wholes in which we move. There should be greater awareness of the connection between all things. There should be more love for that connection. Is desire a stronger source of creation than experience? Maybe. But with Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, the search for links, interrelations, connections, points of contact, is clearly an obsession that reveals a certain desolation. And which, precisely, gives her work such a strong authenticity, that it simply radiates off on you, even before you have fathomed its precise intentions.

In the work of Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven and in *Club Moral*, culture is perceived as a question of values that are upheld and proclaimed by people, in their actions, in their glance, in their attitude. Life is living with values, organising values, solving conflicts between values. That awareness seems to have been lost in many people. They live like moral zombies, parasitising on values without realising their importance. They are blasés who are continually chasing new kicks because their utter lack of understanding of quality leaves them with quantity as their only standard. Immoderate pleasure then becomes their guideline, because the insight that every pleasure - as any art - presupposes moderation, is foreign to them. Without moderation, every desire is exposed to the threat of gluttony, excess, and bulimia, which quite often turns into cruelty as the ultimate kick. For immoderate pleasure is a contradiction in terms, a desire that could only be elevated to an aim in itself in a consumer society. The modern liberation ethos unwittingly paved the way for such a consumer ethos and it is precisely this ethos that has eroded all sense of proportion. We have become the prisoners of a ruthless instrumental reason that dominates everything and monopolises the discourse of liberation. In an act of pure overestimation of its powers, it ignores the fact that its own organisation of elements is only a historical artefact too. And it refuses to see so many other possibilities of thinking freedom, synthesis, and organisation of elements, that have not yet been tried.

The moderation of desire and pleasure does not have to be seen as external to that desire and that pleasure. It is internal to it. That moderation is the virtue that strives for perfectibility. The disbelief in the possibility of attaining greater perfection is precisely what puts this day and age in sackcloth and ashes. In the first place, Morele Herbewapening wants to denounce this indifference and insensitivity and make room for possibilities of perfection as an immanent project.

But the acknowledgement of values in the world and of virtues in the human race does not yield a harmonious world view, and Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven sees that very well. Those values are not coherently organised, and cannot be coherently organised. They give conflicting signals. They oppose each other, fight for predominance, attempt to seduce us, sometimes to lead us astray. There are countless ways of organising values. Organising values is a contextual given. And virtues too are mutually incompatible and conflicting. What makes a good man, a good lover, a good scientist, a good artist? There is a multitude of values and virtues that can assume a certain configuration at a certain moment, in a certain place, a configuration that will probably fall apart again at another moment and in another place, if it does not explode because of its contradictions. That is why Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven presents a diversity of moral survival systems, none of which contains an answer to all questions. But at least they are attempts at giving meaning to the chaos, and that is the reason why Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven cherishes them.

rather than throwing them all on the rubbish heap as worthless failures. There will probably also be a few points of contact, similarities and complementarities that are eligible for recuperation. They can also be approached as challenges or possibilities, incarnations of hope, faith, and love.

In *Paradogma* (1993), Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven herself postulates respect as the central value. And she does so with great integrity. Because each of her works and installations is witness to the concern of creating an authentic atmosphere in which everything can be expressed with precision. Each image is an attempt to express its value content in a well-defined environment. They are exciting images, because this content invariably refers to problems. Harmony cannot be assumed just like that. It has to be won, by rearranging and recombining the elements. And by also emphasising their impermanence, because a good synthesis in one context is not necessarily good in another context.

It may seem like stating the obvious, but it is probably precisely because of that precision that it is so difficult to describe the work of Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven in words. She herself is continuously working with language and with the problematical relation between language and world and between *écriture* and *peinture*. Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven is a graphic artist, a draughtswoman, who attaches importance not only to syntax and semantics, but also to the graphic aspects of the word. Bringing words together yields ever-different semantic fields: words from physics, psychology, philosophy, alchemy, biology, ethics. Words which, just like values, have different meanings according to the field in which they are situated and, just like values, become meaningless when they are divorced from any context.

During our conversations, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven repeatedly said 'I don't know how to tell you this, but wait, I'll show you'. And she certainly knows how to do just that, in an unparalleled way. Her quest has not been fruitless. She has found beauty on her way. She knows how to create beauty. Intelligent beauty, that shows power and fragility at the same time, and expresses the possibility of overcoming the fear of isolation and loneliness. Hope, faith and love. Could it be any simpler and at the same time, any more ambitious? One has to be an artist, and probably also a woman, to succeed in that with so much soul force. ■

¹ Translator's note: 'ontmoeten', 'to meet, to encounter', can also be read as 'ont-moeten', 'de-oblige').

HeadNurse

On women images

Keeping records on images of women and on words out of particular fields made me at a certain point combine them. The same way as cardealers present their newest products with scarcely dressed females.

As an example I sampled words related to particular problems of elasticity, knowledge representation and symmetry in space to connect them with my files of 1. naked women only dressed with a belt, 2. women showing their breasts while fixating the spectator, 3. women busy taking of their blouses over their heads.

In re-interpretating the images, I re-use them across the chosen word. For this I invent slightly fighting logical schemes to induce a certain random factor, for the sake of serendipity, synchronicity. In this way I try things out, I see how they work, if they work. Whereby I use the spectator as a measurement.

The images serve as an instrument in a system to be proved.

At present I use my computer to store images and words. I use my computer to collect them, to create systems in order to reveal things while working. Thus the information becomes the form, a tool; it becomes the canvas on which I work.

The information, the data, becomes the paint, a mixed storage of passed, present and future intelligence.

It's just the way you use the information that decides on the content of the work, that gives the content needed for the actual purpose.

AMVK.22MAR97



From Pin-Ups to Meaning Generators

Filip Luyckx

"Là où d'autres proposent des oeuvres, je ne prétends pas autre chose que de montrer mon esprit." Antonin Artaud

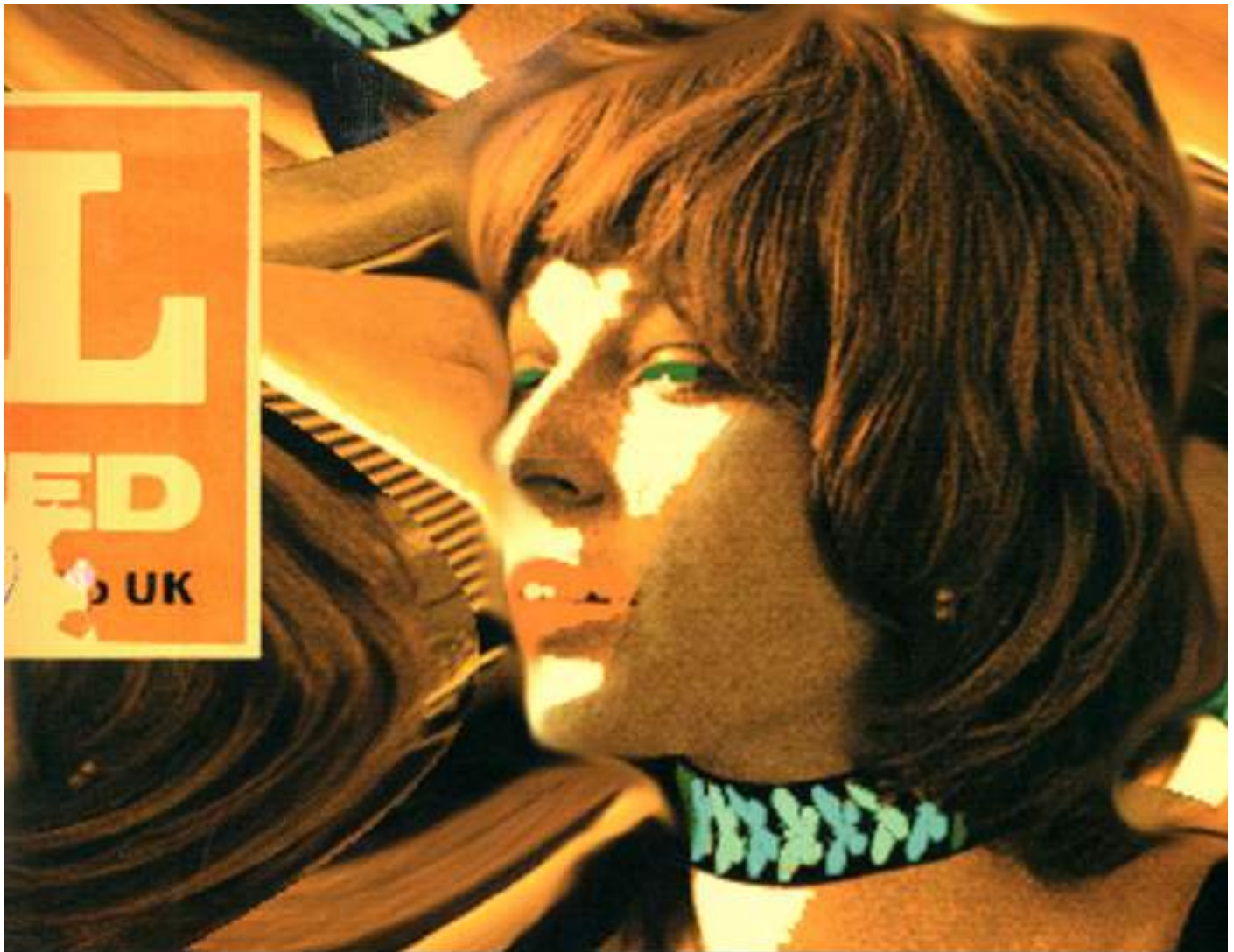
Let's start somewhere in the middle, in the studio or the living room. Interiors are a recurrent element in Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven's oeuvre. They offer security and continuity. When our ancestors gave up their nomadic lifestyle, they looked for a place to stay. Their sedentary life gave them time for reflection. Man became his own subject. In the interior, he distanced himself from the outside world, which he was now able to abstract and order. He gained control over his direct surroundings. But one uncontrollable element of nature remained, i.e., himself. That is why he constructed a second order, that of his cultural self-interpretation, which he extended to his communication with others (language)



and to time (history and religion). In the interior, the mathematization of the world became apparent. There, everything received its outline, structure, and code. The initial freedom to abstract had to yield to the weight of prevailing culture.

Architecture is usually indifferent to what happens inside it. Still, all delineations betray the influence of culture, philosophy, religion, etc. In the purpose of the interior, mental structures are decisive. "The architectural compulsion of house and studio reduce ideas to functional concepts, in the same way as potted plants will eventually stop growing once they have exhausted their compost. Nature, whether a human being or a panorama, is there to be looked at and reflected upon. The domesticated thought thrives like a captured wolf in the house that perpetuates those thoughts."

Throughout sedentary history, women in particular have been relegated to the interior. Household routine, aimed at solving practical problems, suppresses the capacity for detached abstract thought, and therefore, of creative thought. The confined woman has few points of comparison and little food for thought, as she cannot nurture herself with images from the outside world. If, on top of that, there are no books, TV programmes, or people to freely choose from, one could indeed pine away in the narrow scope for thought related to day-to-day worries. The seclusion of the castle-hotel where Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven spent a large part of her youth led to social alienation. Besides with



omnipresent nature, she could only feed her imagination with magazines and a book on Hieronymus Bosch. Isolation alternated with the inevitable observation of feasts. From a distance, she perceived their rigid direction, which gave rise to abstraction and revealed underlying forces. Everyday life metamorphosed into a vibrating feast with positive and negative exchanges of energy between people. Later, they appeared on computer animations and prints as abstract colour fields in movement.

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven drew a lot of inspiration from these feasts for her compositions in various media. A parallel runs from Hieronymus Bosch to the feasts. Both reveal group direction as a separate genre, in which individual vanities dissolve into general compositional movements. Pieter Breughel the Elder, Jacques Callot, and James Ensor are other masters in this genre. In the whole, the individual urge to assert oneself seems quite abstract and appears grotesque. Whether it is about isolation or a feast, the restless spirit always tries to escape.

For Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, drawing has always been a fundamental point of departure. It allows one to immediately give a place to the images that surface intuitively: "(...) the world, transformed to images in my subconscious, a kind of seismographic reproductions of an accumulation of inner life. The outcome was random, very irregular." This

Shifts occur between dimensions that normally remain separated from each other. The work *Akute Rheumatische Myocarditis (Acute Rheumatic Myocarditis)*(1992) shows the severely afflicted face of a child, split along the middle by a banal street. The parallel between syndrome and environmental factors is self-evident and contrasts sharply with the small piece of healthy skin that sticks out above the street. The use of diverse techniques in *Patient* (1991) supports the schizothymia both inside and outside us. Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven first heals herself and then treats society. By means of a complex material process, the multi-layered studio space in the painting installation *Attributes and Substance* (1995) combines questions about sex, mysticism, and the potency (or impotence) of art. Running away from the interior (or from one's own inner chaos) to avoid the process of chastening merely leads to a dead end. The seclusion can weigh even heavier on the new environment when the cosiness of the familiar dwelling is lost. The exchange of one confinement for another takes away even the illusion of escape. The loss of a feeling of home that is an inherent part of a mental prison, leads to a strange mixture of hate and love, as is the case in the installation *Belgisch Spleen (Belgian Spleen)*(1994). The oppressive weight of youth, represented by the office and by a photo, inevitably follows you. Abortive escape attempts and nostalgia lead to a "removal depression", which is averted in the video.

In each image, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven cultivates an unattainable element. You know that there is something else, that the fulfilment will never come, but still you constantly try to avert it in pictures. "This melancholy, this waiting, is a way of life, rather than a state of mind connected to a concrete thing in the world. This melancholy is more like a hot bath one must soak in, undisturbed by the obligation to do anything whatsoever about it. For the melancholic, melancholy is a perfect way to fill time, which no longer needs to be filled constructively, since it is already filled by the mood itself." Melancholy cancels the feeling of time going by.

The spatial presentation of the drawings gradually led to installations, and the comments on these resulted in computer animations. For the Internet, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven developed *Community Places* (1999), virtual spaces which render present Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Melancholy. She also elaborated this idea in photographs on which the name of the philosopher appears together with a portrait of herself in different phases of her life. The brown-green tonality of the first interior refers to Descartes' involvement with nature. In this interior, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven poses as an academy student. At Spinoza's side, she makes her debut as an artist. Beneath each image, one sees the intervention of the virtual. The fourth interior shows the modernist sitting area in the Berlin Akademie der Künste. Man has disappeared. This image is dominated by the melancholy that wants to go to all times, but, in doing so, loses its contemporary face. In the interiors of the four philosophers, rationality predominates, although the graceful settings, those of a castle in Potsdam, suggest the mental structure of an era. The furniture and wall decorations are less important than the elusive general atmosphere that is, as it were, still dominated by a past cultural field. In their desolation, they evoke the domestic loneliness of the drawings, but there are important differences. Seen from the present, there is absolutely no-one who is still present in the past, and that including ourselves. Even when nostalgia chooses a concrete object, it is barred by the boundary of time. On the other hand, the stately drawing rooms (or philosophical systems) were centres of vital activity once. Negative feelings of desire had not yet grown into the present mountain. Therefore, one can grow nostalgic in these interiors, and escape from modern nostalgia, which seems to have a more depressed undertone. Thanks to new media, the nostalgia of these interiors can be reconstructed towards the future. The designs express a longing

for a future that would look like the past. In a roundabout way, we once again come closer to the past.

There is a tremendous difference between a rebellious spirit that feels forced to live in a mediocre environment and someone whose spirit coincides with its limitations. As an extreme solution to isolation, one can turn intimacy inside out and exhibit it in public. The exteriorisation of the inside is subject to codes, such as the codes governing pictures of women in magazines. In fact, one sees a social phenomenon, rather than the person. A totally different effect of alienation is provoked by De Zetel (The Chair)(1999), in which an interior ends up in the middle of the street. It is unpleasant for the viewer to be confronted with such an expression of despair. The person who has been chucked out seems to have lost all courage to live. Behind the



chair, we can see, successively, nature, the road, and a row of very conformist houses. Don't lots of people actually feel fine in their suffocating interior? In such a context, the wish to escape is doomed to become a downward spiral, a fall towards the less than mediocre. Creative energy has a destructive effect. The chair and the green dissolve into an abstract whole. Its owner loses all self-involvement and has been on his journey to the end of the night (Louis-Ferdinand Céline). In his failed attempt to escape from seduction, away from the accepted average, he has become public to an absurd extent. It is the kind of road that only leads to identical houses and closed interiors. Contrary to pin-ups, that have become socially acceptable thanks to the codes of image creation, the chair is on view as a disturbing piece of waste.

There is no question of voyeurism in De Zetel, because the owner does not wish to be a successful spectacle and the spectator feels disturbed by the presence. In her Roze Borsten (Pink Breasts)(1985) series of drawings, on the other hand, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven does make a study of displaying, watching, and being watched. Images may bring new insights and are excellent vehicles of information. The serial approach results in a simultaneity and a concentration that are rarely encountered in the visual deluge that is poured over us in reality. Fifteen variations are reduced to one basic pose. As the title suggests, breasts, together with framing hands, dominate the scene. Not only does the point of view change constantly, but the arms, the hands, and especially the fingers also shamelessly present the breasts. It is a purely sexual and totally impersonal seduction. Only the last drawing contains an animal face. Whereas normally, the presence of context incorporates the erotic in the total human experience, here, the surrounding image enhances the mechanics of seduction. Explicit display fully exploits its antipode, i.e. the repression of erogenous nudity. The exclusive focus on the torso and the hands leads to a restriction of awareness and a fixation on the genital. Subtle seduction is supplanted by pornographic challenge. There are many ways of looking at a naked breast: anatomically, medically, technically, aesthetically, as a naturalist or as someone suffering from anorexia. This time, the image is more compelling than it is attractive. Does the character not squint through her nipples like the ancient goddess Baubo? The image provokes the voyeurist gaze, needs it, and even absorbs it. The gesture of pulling a garment away suggests the revealing of intimacy. But what is shown is no more than a surface of skin,

completed by the voyeurist gaze. We are confronted with so much at once that we fix our gaze on the intimacy of the skin. From the surface, we then plunge into the context and the interpretation, to finally return to the upper structure. Is this about the breasts, the garment, the fingers, and the absent face, or is it about our interpretation, suffused as it is with an entire history of culture? The protagonist awakens our erotic need, she makes the spectators dependent, but in fact, she cannot exist without longing eyes. The character is impersonal and easily replaceable.

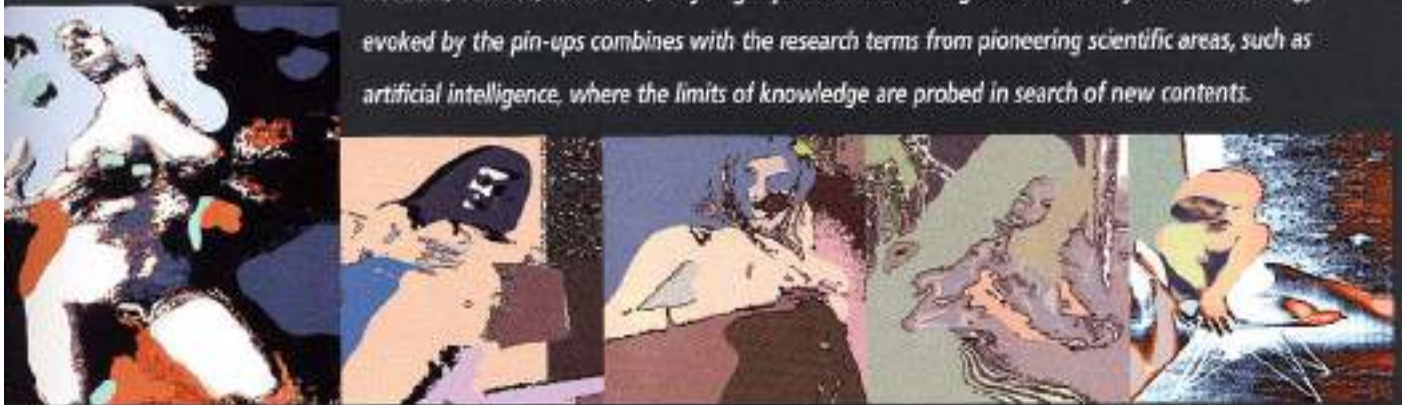
Behind the immediacy of the image lies conditioning. The naked breasts are subject to social codes that tolerate unveiling in the margin, as long as it is presented as concealment. The artificial mechanics of seduction leads a life of its own, beside, yet never totally isolated from society.



Numerous invisible threads connect the two worlds. What appears to be provocative is no more than an outlet, a forbidden fruit from the same orchard. Just like in media strategies, the aiming after effect is what counts. This implies that Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven introduces a critical note in the series. Together with exaggeration, the repetitive element reinforces our insight into the stereotypical display. In reality, breast presentations are accompanied by time fragments and surrounding images. The fact of divorcing them from their context reinforces both the objectification of the breasts and the criticism of this objectification. In order to be studied, images demand isolation and ostentation. But the critical distance from what is shown is mainly due to the fact that the fifteen scenes are elevated to the status of art. With a minimum of lines, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven endows the breasts and fingers with an elegance that is contradicted by the gestures. It is as if the hands and nipples replace eye contact and words. They speak a vulgar language that appeals to our negative energy. Because Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven aestheticizes the images, she gives the spectator a critical insight in the ideology behind images of women.

As a reaction against the mediatization of the object-woman, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven began collecting all kinds of women images from magazines and newspapers a long time ago. The twentieth century has produced a strikingly large number of images of unattainable women, subject to male gazes. For want of self-acceptance, men unleashed their repressed desires in these emotionally charged symbols. The models themselves remained unapproachable. Commercial companies made clever use of these new energy conductors. Because pin-ups stimulated the senses without a prospect of fulfilment, the energy they generated could serve another purpose. Desire was transformed into the urge to consume, media addiction, and ideological propaganda. Pin-ups went hand in hand with the military machinery and even appeared on aeroplanes. They outshone real women, who, in turn, tried to approach the physical appearance of the models. Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven makes use of their advertising power, changes the context and form of the idols, degrades or elevates them. The divas metamorphose from bait into an anti-force. She links them to all kinds of new meanings which, at first sight, have nothing to do with the language of seduction, such as scientific terms. Thus, both elements are redefined. In the same way that many contents lie hidden behind images of women, the intrinsic meaning of words can be rewritten and extended. Each photograph of

a woman and each scientific term is merely used as visual material which, combined, like one kind of paint is combined with another, are processed into new contents. Both components are merely raw materials. Starting from the most superficial images of society, the artist studies the invisible forms of self-organisation within existing systems and how they invariably settle themselves on the logic particular to that system. Each series functions as a hidden structure that generates other systems. As such, these resilient organisation models stand for universal freedom, because, tomorrow, they might just as well be integrated in other systems. The energy evoked by the pin-ups combines with the research terms from pioneering scientific areas, such as artificial intelligence, where the limits of knowledge are probed in search of new contents.



The pin-ups in turn probe the boundaries of desire. Both poles therefore escape from their established meanings. Concepts acquire an erotic form and photographer's models become scientific models. The pin-ups change from being a tool of female suppression to being an instrument of women's liberation. Science withdraws from language and can continue its research by means of symbols with shifting meanings. Since the images of women need the spectator's attention in order to work, he is involved in the whole process of conferring meaning. Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven strives after images that have the communicational impact of the pre-language era. It struck her that photographs of women often referred to ancient representations of goddesses of fertility. Visual meaning can precede language.

On her intuitive search, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven feels that certain signs are right, although they do not immediately yield their deeper contents. The videos consist of several equivalent layers, and can be programmed interactively and at random. The dialogue with the spectators or an integration in another context gives rise to new interpretations. The installations and virtual video spaces are interiors, of which one should in the first place experience the atmosphere. We are looking at an alchemical landscape full of symbols, with a surface effect that leaves a symbolic imprint on our memory. The precise meanings will perhaps reveal themselves at a later stage. ■

Colophon

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