

Common Grounds

Autopia is the catalogue for XX's show of the same name as well as a speculative statement regarding current conditions for visual production and exhibition-making.

In the aftermath of XX's exhibition at the Museum, which ran from December 5, 2014 to January 19, 2015, the Museum has sought to find a path through the terrain of XX's artistic praxis. As a record of this search, the catalogue is intended to function as a mentoring device in the slippery field of artistic knowledge production.

The catalogue is part of the Museum's *Common Grounds* series, meaning it uses an editorial process characterized by conversation. Here, the conversation includes commissioned contributions from Pieter Van Bogaert, Kristian Poulsen, Anne Mette Schultz and Signe Frederiksen. Primarily however, it is structured by a conversation between XX and Eva la Cour, taking place in Copenhagen, Brussels and Gothenburg, and operating in three parts: *Working Space*, *The Exhibition* and *Conference Time*.

The Museum wishes to thank all the contributors and the Danish Art Workshops.

Opposite page: **La vitrine**
(1999) by XX. DV video, 16
min.

Introducing XX

“To name the object [...] is to take possession of it and, as it were, to dominate it.”

– Nicolas Abraham

Over the last couple of years, XX has become known to the Danish audience primarily through her 2010 exhibition and collaboration with Danmarks Radio (the Danish Broadcasting Corporation) titled *Works and Other Unrealized Projects*. Here, XX marked a position between the very present, the distant other and a cultural shift in ways of thinking about the exhibiting artist.

Since then the Museum has wanted to produce an exhibition dealing with a broader range of XX's works. However, a retrospective exhibition is challenging and one might argue that XX's exhibition at the Museum is not a proper retrospective. Nevertheless, it is our hope that the *Autopia* exhibition as part of the Museum's *Common Grounds* series, will provide the Scandinavian audience with a multifaceted and up-to-date image of the artist and her universe – in XX's words her “autonomous topos” – that works like an entry of identification for the viewer and, at best, evokes a feeling of presence. “You are present,” as the Brussels-based art critic Pieter Van Bogaert writes in his essay for this catalogue.

Born in Turnhout in Belgium close to the Netherlands in 1969, XX grew up on the periphery of Belgium, which in terms of graphic communication and printmaking is its center. Here both her parents were employed by Cartamundis in the printing industry. At an early age, however, she moved to Brussels and then later to London where she eventually graduated from the Slade School of Arts in

the early 1990s. Since then she has been living and working as a visual artist partly in London and partly in Brussels.

An exhibition review from one of her first solo exhibitions after she graduated in 1993 pointed out, "Being a Belgian artist, XX's particular choice of pseudonym inevitably echoes the 19th century art group known as Les XX, who worked aggressively towards a break with conventional art practices."

An inevitable echo? In the catalogue, *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde* (1993), Alexander Murphy and Carl Strikwerda write that Les XX was a group of Belgian artists who, by choosing this numeric name (Les XX = The Twenty), intended to organize themselves at a distance from the exclusive government salons and criticize the persistent conservatism engendered by King Leopold II's patronage of other



The Theater of the Self
(2010) by XX. Digitalized
16mm film, 12 min. Courtesy
of the artist and the Danish
Broadcasting Corporation.

"The drawing submitted for the Les XX 1888 catalogue by Anna Boch shows a scruffy figure standing at what could be a street corner in the working class Marolles section of Brussels, reading a list of Boch's paintings as if it were a poster with public information. On the one hand this gesture puts art in the streets. On the other hand, her posted address, No.1, Avenue de la Toison d'Or is a quintessentially upper-class location. This apparent lack of contradiction between populist motives and patrician identity is a common element that ran through much of the Belgian avant-garde." (Stephen H. Goddard, *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde*, 1993.)



exhibition societies. The legacy of Les XX is thus palpable within the history of Belgian art, especially since its members included James Ensor and Henry van de Velde. However, while it might be possible, perhaps even worth a speculative study, to write a narrative based on the relatedness of Les XX's Belgian avant-garde and XX's contemporary artistic practice, this would be a projection. When asked about her use of the pseudonym XX has rather given answers such as the following: "I wish for XX to render various associations possible depending on context. [...] XX is the closest I can get to a no-name in my attempt to avoid the subjectification of myself as an artist."

Once familiar with XX's practice, such an attempt, however, seems a bit hollow. More than anyone else, XX is aware of the impossibility of escaping representation. The problem begins with the name. Therefore it is tempting to suggest that XX, rather than being interested in the problem of subjectification or representation, is interested in theater itself, or the theater of the self. As a visual artist, XX is not interested in showing that the world is full of arbitrary binaries but in developing tools and strategies that can allow her to do what she does. She is interested in the discrepancies between what is said and what is done, as raw material. XX is a tool, a projection surface and a fiction.

Eva la Cour, February 2016



The Theater of the Self
(2010) by XX. Digitalized
16mm film, 12 min. Courtesy
of the artist and the Danish
Broadcasting Corporation.

YOU ARE PRESENT

BY PIETER VAN BOGAERT

"There are no images, can be no images, in consciousness. The image is rather a certain type of consciousness. The image is an act and not a thing. The image is consciousness of something."

- **Jean-Paul Sartre**

You are a Belgian artist with an interesting project – interesting, but not easy to describe. It is not an exhibition, even if you do exhibit things. It is not an installation, even if your interventions are often environmental. It isn't even a presentation, because nobody knows that you are there. And yet, *presence* is the word used to describe what you are doing by the arts center in Brussels where you are carrying out the project. *You are present.*

You are a Belgian artist and refusing to use your name is part of your work. You want to set your work free. You do not want to guide your audience, not with your name, not with the name of the arts center, not with any announcement of your work. You decide to work anonymously and leave your work as *inserts* in public spaces. You call yourself XX because in order to become imperceptible to the other, you first have to become imperceptible to yourself. This shared identity is the first step in sharing your work with others. You are your first other.

You start this project to get out of an *impasse*. You want to get in touch with your audience, to get a reaction, to generate feedback *through your work*, not through your name. You want to go beyond the image, put the imagination to work, make images work. Instead of adding images to all the images that are already there, you want to turn the image into a process. *Image as process*: that is what you always already do in your performative work; that is what you have

done ever since you decided to shift your attention from images to the imagination. You call it the *imaginary practice*. That is the real subject of your collaboration, of your project, of your *presence*.

You want to know how images work. Like **Bruno Latour** in *Making Things Public* you want to know how *things* work, how images become *things*, how to look at things not as *matters of fact*, but as *matters of concern*. Just like **Latour**, you want to look at things as *gatherings* that bring people together, like the *Althing* in Iceland, the very first known parliament: a place to share ideas, facts, concerns, the place to find *common ground*.

But it remains too abstract. You still don't know how to reach beyond yourself, how to reach and move an audience, how to get beyond mere images, how to reach through to the *imaginary practice*. You need something to make it more concrete, a *place* for things to gather. So you contact a Brussels arts institution with a very vague plan to make an exhibition that is not really an exhibition, with images that aren't really images and a book that is not really a book.

You are invited by the arts institution. You find out that it isn't the vagueness of your proposal that attracts them but what makes it concrete: your name and reputation as a Belgian artist. More: the arts institution has a proposal to make it even more concrete. The institution thinks your project can fit very well with another proposal from Belgian television for a new cultural program and yet another from the city of Brussels to do *something* with an empty piece of ground in the city center. You learn how the institution works: linking persons and opportunities. That is what generates their *imaginary practice*.

Things start to lead a life of their own. You share your project and your person in a new common initiative. It isn't your project anymore. And that is exactly what you are after.

You send out applications. Your proposal for the Brussels arts institution is the first one, which you use as a basis to elaborate. You make a new application for the *Stedenfonds* (Dutch for *Cities Foundation*) in which you emphasize the social aspect of your artis-

tic endeavor: the fact that you will make a cross-section through a tiny strip of the gentrifying city and gather people who rarely meet. You make a second application, to the visual arts commission of the Flemish community in Belgium, in which you emphasize the project's artistic qualities: to make images as they have never been seen or produced before. Finally you make a third application, to a smaller cultural commission in the Brussels region. Each application takes your project in a new direction. What starts as a residency (for the arts institution), becomes a social-cultural project (for the *Stedenfonds*), a revolutionary arts project (for the visual arts commission) and ends as a very local project (for the Brussels region). Encouraged by the arts institution, you become very ambitious, as a real artist should be. This clearly isn't you, but that is what this project is all about: sharing things, making things public, putting things to work.

You believe in everything you write in the applications. And even if you don't get all the subventions you ask for, every idea in these applications becomes part of what is (un)becoming your project: to make an *inventory of acts*; to collect ideas, images, quotes and share them through *inserts*; to make a cross-section of a Brussels neighborhood, starting from the arts institution in the gentrified part of the city and leading to the asylum seekers waiting for work and papers just a few hundred meters down the street; to create a system of workshops, not by organizing them yourself but by visiting existing workshops – offices, desks, studios, ateliers, salons – to find out how things work *with* and *next to* each other.

You get some feedback but most of the time your *inserts* remain unnoticed. You discover that some people – the few who know you are working on the project – even find *inserts* that you didn't make. So, while images that you do make remain largely unnoticed, others you don't make are seen. It is all part of the *imaginary practice*.

Your thoughts go back to the *impasse* you started from. You made an exhibition to react to the feeling of an excess of images around the turn of the millennium. There were 9/11, the war in Iraq, the images

from Abu Ghraib or of hostage beheadings. Many had the feeling there were too many images. Your thesis for the exhibition is that there were not too many, but too many of the *same* images. You want *other* images, *different* images. Therefore you make an exhibition with all the images that have been made and all the images that haven't. Your inspiration comes from **Jean-Luc Godard**, whose similarly Borgesian ambition in ***Histoire(s) du cinéma*** is to show all the films that have been made and all the films that haven't. His film history runs parallel to the history of the 20th century. At the center of that century there is the excess of WWII. That is what everything leads or refers to. Your exhibition runs parallel with the history of the decade around the turn of the millennium. At the center of that decade stands the excess of 9/11. That is what all these images refer to.

It turns out to be an impossible project. You can always find more images, *other* images, *different* images. That is the reason why you turn your attention towards the imagination, which eventually becomes the *imaginary practice*. Instead of the image as such, you turn your attention to the image as process.

You call it a(n) (im)possible project, a project where the impossible is always already part of the possible. Remember the slogan you start with: *another world is possible*. You ask yourself *which* world the slogan refers to and *how possible* it can be. This idea of *another* world is what drives people. That is what the *imaginary practice* is about. If you can think it, if you can imagine it, it is already there.

You find inspiration in yourself as someone who works with people and in the people and things you meet, strolling through the arts institution and the neighborhood. You become a *copycat*, trying to adapt ways of looking, seeing, handling in your own actions. You become like **Bouvard and Pécuchet** in the eponymous novel by **Gustave Flaubert**: 19th century clerks, copyists, trying to put in practice what they read in books. It results in a series of disasters and the only thing they learn is that all they are good at is copying. That is what they do at the end of the book, when everything else fails.

They build themselves a double desk, a desk incorporating its own copy, and continue doing what they always have.

The story suggests another, that of **Bartleby**, another 19th century clerk, another copyist, in another eponymous novel, by **Herman Melville**. **Bartleby** confounds everyone around him by constantly repeating a single, strange phrase: *I would prefer not to*. His negative affirmation returns in your game with the *(on)tjes*. The prefix “on-“ in Dutch is like “un-,” “im-“ or “dis-“ in English. Your favorite word is *(on)gemakkelijk*: (un)easy. Putting the “un-“ prefix onto “easy” makes the one part of the other: the ease becomes part of the unease. That is how your negative affirmation (or positive negation) works: the negation becomes part of the affirmation (or vice versa).

You find texts on **Bartleby** by 20th century philosophers like **Gilles Deleuze** or **Giorgio Agamben**. You very much like a text by the American philosopher **John Paul Ricco**: *The Logic of the Lure*. **Ricco** refers to **Bartleby** and his affirmation that isn't one or to *Blue*, the film by **Derek Jarman** that isn't one because there are no images. The absence of images left **Jarman** as an artist completely free. **Ricco** uses these and other examples to construct his theory for a *queer pedagogy*. His pedagogy that isn't one (but always already *becomes* one) has a lot to do with places and spaces. It starts in the *darkroom* and ends in the *bedroom*, but not without passing by the *classroom*. These are the places where **Ricco** learns and becomes what he is: a queer, different, other philosopher. That is how he *uses* the institution and *critiques* it at the same time.

But the name of the ultimate story in your project is *Love*. Not just the love of the bedroom, but a love that goes much further. Not the love for the person close to you, but the love of the farthest. Or, as **Nietzsche** writes in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: higher still than love of men is the love of things and phantoms. Higher thus than the love for what is, is the love for what is yet to be/come. That story starts with the acceptance of the unknown. Patience plays an important role in this, because, just like **Bouvard and Pécuchet**, you make a

lot of mistakes and have to start all over again after every new one. Like **Bartleby**, it is a story of affirmative negations, a story of finding *common ground* in what is not there yet, a story of finding your own places to learn and to (un)become what you are: you have to find your own *darkroom, bedroom, classroom*. In the end, these are the *things* you are after: the places to gather, to exchange, to share, to love.

You don't have to go far to meet someone who is not close to you. He is right there in front of the arts center on the stairs to the main entrance, begging for money from the people on the street. You talk to him. His name is David. He has lived on the street for years. You find a mutual interest. He is not only begging for money, but also for an audience. He doesn't write applications, but invents attractions. His latest is a fishing rod with a small bucket at the end. It cost him 20 euros to buy all the props he needed, but the return on investment is good, he says.

You like this man. The other day you went back to see if he was still there. He wasn't. He had (dis)appeared, becoming no more present than your project which was never really there. This text is all that remains: an afterthought, the *common ground* of the unknown, of what was and has not been there. Take it as the ultimate sign of your love.

This [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] this is a book
about thresholds, those mysterious zones of interaction that
mediate between different realities. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
They are not simply objects or boundary points. They are
autonomous zones of activity [REDACTED] They are not things, but
rather processes that effect a result of whatever kind. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] And in
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] They
[REDACTED] themselves are effects, in that they bring about transfor-
mations in material states. But at the same time [REDACTED] they are
themselves the effects of other things, and thus tell the story
of the larger forces that engender them.

From the catalogue for
*Works and Other Unrealized
Projects* (2010) by XX.