WORKING ETHICS
FROM A CERTAIN FLANDERS

With Carla Arocha, David Claerbout, Niels Donckers,Karin Hanssen, Philip Huyghe, Marco Jacobs, Narcisse Tordoir, Koen De Decker, Gert Robijns, Pascale Marthine Tayou, Michael Van Den Abeele, Annemie Van Kerckhoven, Vanessa Van Obberghen and Gert Verhoeven.
Curated by Philippe Pirotte, objectif_exhibitions, Antwerpen

Opening: Wednesday April 21st 2004, 7 pm.

"Working Ethics (from a certain Flanders)" as a title for an exhibition is not necessarily the starting point for the illustration of a concept or a thematic. It might allude to a compensatory strategy for a minority complex but it is rather a maybe ironic referent to prevalent ideas about Flanders, and to an extend Belgium. It is almost impossible to say something relevant about the links between the cultural goods which are produced in Flanders. It is simply impossible to say something about a Flemish identity because its formation is a permanent process in which internal (or local) and external (or international) feedback is a constituent factor. The Flemish art world within Belgium deals with a political division which is foreign to its highly diverse concerns. The Belgian grey Flag "Birth of a Nation" by Michael Van den Abeele can be read in this respect. Belgian nationality is a ghost-appearance, a phantom that covers the true separatist developments inside the country from the outside. Belgium, the model for the co-existing of different commumities? The truth is that its culture is more and more functioning as an Apartheid system. What remains is Belgium as a construction (thus useful as a model). The (grey) copy of the flag borders a space between the original (the once ago nation Belgium) and the copy. This is to create a negative space, to be left open.

Nor programmatic, nor identifying with the reductive idea of what has commonly been known as 'Belgitude' (this last term refers to a certain type of art often associated with the heritage of Ensor and Magritte), the artworks and artists are chosen as much as possible on their own terms but connections and juxtapositions will turn out – however circumstantial - to be surprisingly revealing. There has been made a very conscious choice for a few artists in order to be able to give them a more substantial presence than a merely representational one, in order to constitute a meaningful show that contextualizes itself through its artworks.

Niels Donckers' photography-work draws on the legacy of the Becher School in Düsseldorf concerning its (pseudo)-scientific undertaking and its painstakingly technique but it unmistakenly is evenso concerned with a 'belgian' or 'flemish' spark. His main focus of attention is the Flemish architectural landscape (he also works on commissions for the architectural department of the Flemish Community), an ever-growing suburbia where urban centers and countryside become increasingly blurred. Important in Niels Donckers' work is an unpenetrable immobility the houses alternating with photographs of the in-between-space, which conveys this familiar landscape, witnessing the Belgian or Flemish 'constructing-frenzy', with an uncanny animation of the claustrofobic.

Carla Arocha examines the intersection of art, fashion, and identity by using familiar clothing design patterns such as animal prints in abstract works of art. Assuming the knowledge that the forms of visual art have been recuperated as decorative devices for today´s lifestyles, she moves some of these elements back to contaminate the specific practice of making art and the particular historical space of painting where they are displayed. Infused with ´ingredients´ out of the broader field of cultural production (ranging from patterns, fabrics, fashion and modernist painting to the knowledge of optical illusions and biological reactions) the apparent formal harmlesness of Arocha´s works leads us astray and informs us about ourselves - uninvited.

David Claerbout shows two preparotory drawings for the video-installation Reflecting Sunset. The composition represents the sunset reflecting in the windows of a building dating from the 1930's (i.e. Stazione Maritima, Naples, Italy), as well as it vaguely mirrors the horizon and skyline of the urban landscape. The austere frontality in which the architecture of the facade is composed, is in sharp contrast with the illuminated depth of the reflected landscape. In the video-work, the camera observes no other movement than the track of the sun setting. During the 38 minutes of its course

across the screen, the sun hits first the marble stones of the facade, only to be violently reflected a moment later as the sun reappears in the next window. The beholder's eye instinctively reacts to the projected sunlight, as it would do to real sunlight, because it remembers the physical pain of looking straight into a source of bright light.

Superficially, Karin Hanssen's work could be an expression of something like free time, in a manner that calls up unconcealed references to Edward Hopper. Hanssen's drawings Modern Living is a series of works on paper, in which the luminosity is mitigated. The world that appears in Modern Living is in itself a sort of appropriation of a near past. Karin Hanssen introduces something, which can be termed auto-exoticism, not as a non-committal recontextualization of "signs and symbols," but to problematize the inevitable confrontation with history and its inaccessibility. The viewer is subjected to the temptation to take on the mimetic role of accomplice to a not so far past.

More than a year now Narcisse Tordoir embarked on a project of artistic collaboration inviting young artists and more renowned colleages to venture in the field of artistic collaboration. The works take on diverse forms ranging from flat-ness to outright installations including sound, video images, found objects, beercans, lamps, radio transmissions etc. The series of works allows Tordoir to step forward as a new type of artistic interface, allowing connections from diffe-rent origins to come together in a vast field of activities. In this work with Koen de Decker, a horizontal panel of alumini-um has a square opening in the middle, where parts of De Deckers memory archive are scattered (A series of seed and branch like containers that relate to the brain and the development of life forms). With the objects that De Decker pro-duces or collects, there is not only the dialogue which the artist enters into with their form and content; there is also, though perhaps less obviously, a degree of introspection within the object itself. Thus the objects and drawings are not just products of communication between the artist and medium, but they also engage in an internal dialogue. Repetition, ramification, multiplication, mirroring and disorientation are thus recurring means that are employed, and precisely the artlessness, humour and diversity of these works reveal the self-reflection involving them. Small video images reflect in the shiny surfaces of some of the objects as an instant memory (source: website Tordoir)

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, or simply AMVK, creates since more than 20 years an extensive oeuvre that stands obstina-tely apart in Belgian art. The subjects of her work are frequently just on the verge of 'normality'. Moreover, her violent use of color and the harsh technological materials might put the viewer in a compromising position: her work is of the type that you have to take or leave.
Her fascination for the individual's mental functioning and essence led her in the early 1980s to seek contact with the scientific world. For many years she worked in the Laboratory for Artificial Intelligence in Brussels, where the functions of the human brain are studied and reconstructed. In this context she has been exploring the uneasily accessible areas of the unconscious and thus places herself within a reviving spiritual tradition where scientists and artists mutually col-laborate and need each other in a common effort to achieve a more human society.
The new video-installation Deeper in which Belgian dancer and choreographer Marc Vanrunxt plays an important role uses the modernist rule of reduction as an element of style to descend into what AMVK describes herself as "the essence of matter by use of some kind of anti-evil. Therefore also to descend in thought, searching for the immoral, the anti-matter. Deeper in the substance, further away from hell, along with symbolism, into the abysses of the human, that is the intention."

Vanessa Van Obberghen uses photography, video and installation. She has a special interest in the (im)possibilities of cultural transfers with a specific focus on the city of Dakar, Senegal. The new work, developed under the title 'Dose-Moi' which comes from the French verb 'doser' and means 'to balance'. In West African slang it is connected to style and attitude as a sort of visual language constituted through the body, taking up its form and developing its sense in communication with others. A good 'doseur' knows how to have an attitude 'in style' without becoming a caricature. 'Doser' is a play of invitation and rejection, a kind of seduction but not necessarily erotic. The title of the project is such a challenge that implies a metaphorical invitation towards a spectator. This supposes an investment from the part of the public, which in the same time is subjected to a configuration of works that circumscribe elliptically the phenomenon without giving concrete (documentary or anthropological) information. The dancefloor installation inviting the spectator to dance and show off in relation to him or herself as participant-observer, could be read as a re-evaluation of Dan Graham´s large-scale pavilions, both shelters and spaces for social interaction where activities can be both engaged in and observed and, as a problematization of Adrian Piper´s Funk Lessons performance.

The signature site-specific installations of Pascale Marthine Tayou include dense labyrinths of city detritus, graffiti, and diagrammatic drawings, all arranged in dynamic and chaotic improvisational compositions of a diaristic and absurdist logic. The accumulation, a product of Tayou's obsessive gesture of collecting paraphernalia of his personal history, par-ticularly tracing his history of travel, performs as a kind of altar to memory and migration. In this body of urban-scape installations, Tayou employs debris to illustrate that culture is both collectible and dispensable. His work provides a

forum for activating and literalizing global exchange, dialogue, translation, and untranslatability. Specially for Working Ethics Tayou created two drawings and two smaller scale sculptures.

Philip Huyghe´s art shows the attraction of bourgeois existence, but also the problem of dealing with it. The work expresses the desire to belong to this safe context, but in its problematic encounter with that context, it also shows up its oppressive set of values. The tie with the mother is placed at its centre, but here too disruptive forces are at work. In recognizing all this, and our familiarity with it - the performativity, the images´urge to be seen, points to this - the awareness grows, in the spectator, that there is no escape from this cultural reality.

In Marco Jacobs' photographic work we get to see but fragments, the camera seems to palpate different surfaces; the image of a coherent environment remains inaccessible but the montage of the 'fragments' suggests a filmic space. For Working Ethics, Jocobs selected two portraits of the same girl. The animation that installs itself when looking at these photographs problematizes the notion of time. The depiction suggests a time lapse. On the other hand, the technical perfection of the prints seems to come from the past. We are forced to enjoy the surface of the prints in their materiality, but the fascination for the meticulous perfection doesn't give us an acces to the origine of the images. The remembrance of a story, a narrative behind these photographs is tangible but only as a supposition of an unavoidable necessty, without any clues for a plausible reconstruction.

Gert Robijns confronts us with a "super-reality" in his work: a universe that exists parallel to the one that manifests itself visually. In order to make us experience this world, Robijns analyses and distills various aspects of our reality. Images, sounds, objects, and our surroundings are reconsidered as singular, characteristic entities. Thus the artist creates an analogous reality, which, however, is only slightly displaced relative to our own world. But precisely these slight dislocations, in which cause and effect, image and sound become disconnected, result in powerful, simple experiences. For example in a reconstruction of a billiards table: the balls are absent, the pockets have been sealed. The table has lost its functional aspect. No balls hit the cushion. From the table merely sounds a game being played emanate: a reminiscence of the past or a reference to the future. The object — the billiard table — is nothing but a souvenir.

Gert Verhoeven works towards an exploration of the possibilities of the visual arts, determining the place(s) of art within the complex of social practices. He has never resisted the urge to escape the restrictions of the creative existence and the manipulations of the art world. His sculptures, drawings and videotapes share seemingly uninhibited vocabularies and esthetic casualness. Some artists use informality to emphasize their idiosyncratic seeing of the world, others to blur the lines between their art and everything else. Verhoeven's offhandedness evokes a realm where varying sorts of language and babble exuberantly intertwine, where child's play meets the assembly line, psychoanalysis is a subject of merriment and Marcel Broodthaers the eminence grise. For Working Ethics he shows two tables with ceiling fragments telling jokes in different languages and the video 'The Blob' (2001). It is a report on the "World Pumpkin Confederation Contest" in Buffalo, New York and Port Elgin, Ontario, Canada. The recording style is typical of a straight documentary but also extremely fragmentary, leaving the spectator without a clue on what it is about at first. Jerkily he keeps seeing the image of pumpkins, giant pumpkins. In all their squatness and flabbiness they are subject to a multitude of curious manipulations by masculine hands and fork trucks. Due to the lack of a storyline the attention of the spectator clings itself to formal details and actions. The comments and dubious questions of the voice-over in the distant background mainly serve as white noise. Yet, after some guesswork the viewer can make out he is watching a persiflage in which the pumpkins are put forward as artworks-in-progress, whereas the absurd ritual of the contest is a reference to the machinations of the accompanying art market.

The E.U- void flag by Michael Van den Abeele becomes revealing in relation the site of the exhibition, Vienna. It is a paraphrase on the Romanian flag during the overthrow of Ceaucescu. The communist insigne was cut out of the centre of the flag. There was 2...enthusiasm over this hole, not yet hegemonized by any positive ideological project; all the ideological appropriation (from the nationalistic to the liberal-democratic) entered the stage afterwards and endeavored to "kidnap" the process which was originally not their own..." (Slavoj Zizek, Tarrying with the negative, Duke University Press, 1993) Western Europe was equally enthousiast. At least the east would be free, free to reinvent democracy. At last the East could embrace, and come back to good old Europe. Now a decade later the West is not so sure anymore. With new countries entering the EU, with the nation-identity in crisis and nationalisms using this to their benefit. A new Apartheid is emerging within the borders of Europe.

This flag is not as cynical as it may seem though. It claims that Europe is far from an accomplished project. To think about Europe is to render visible again the possible holes and to occupy the place of this hole.

Philippe Pirotte, exhibition curator