

CONTRE NATURE

MICHEL
FRANÇOIS

CONTRE
NATURE

MER. B&L BOZAR BOOKS

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STUDIO Brussels, BE, 2020

FOREWORD IN FULL DAYLIGHT

*Usually the way you look at something isn't enough to understand it,
you have to put your whole body into it.*

—Michel François in Hans Theys,
*Nothing up my Sleeve (and Nothing
in my Pockets Either). A Few Words
about Michel François's Work*

Bozar – Centre for Fine Arts Brussels is not a white cube. It is not a virgin canvas on which the artist starts from scratch. Victor Horta's hand remains very present in the exhibition set-ups. The rooms breathe memories of previous guests. When you conjure them up before the mind's eye, you collapse under the weight of art. Physically you would soon lack breathing space and you would run away as fast as you can. Your head will start spinning because of this accumulation of imagination. Who and what has been in this place? Art from so many centuries, so many art schools! The spirit of James Ensor (*Christ's Entry into Brussels*), Marcel Broodthaers (*Un Jardin d'Hiver*), Daniel Buren (*Peinture Horizontale*) and Jacqueline Mesmaeker (*Ah, quelle aventure!*) fills the rooms. The whole twentieth century has left traces here. Art treasures from so many beautiful collections, from so many eras were here as guests. Yet, at Bozar every exhibition is also a new beginning. The exhibition routes are an invitation to the artists, curators and set designers to bring about a dialogue between the works of art and the rooms, and to allow the visitors to breathe and steer their course through the rooms.

The Centre for Fine Arts is neither an art workshop, nor a rehearsal room—or at least not essentially. There are no studios or rehearsal rooms in the house. The time for setting up an exhibition is limited. Rehearsals are meant to be sound checks or warm-ups. Creation belongs essentially elsewhere. Artists come here to show their work, to perform, to come on stage.

Enter Michel François...

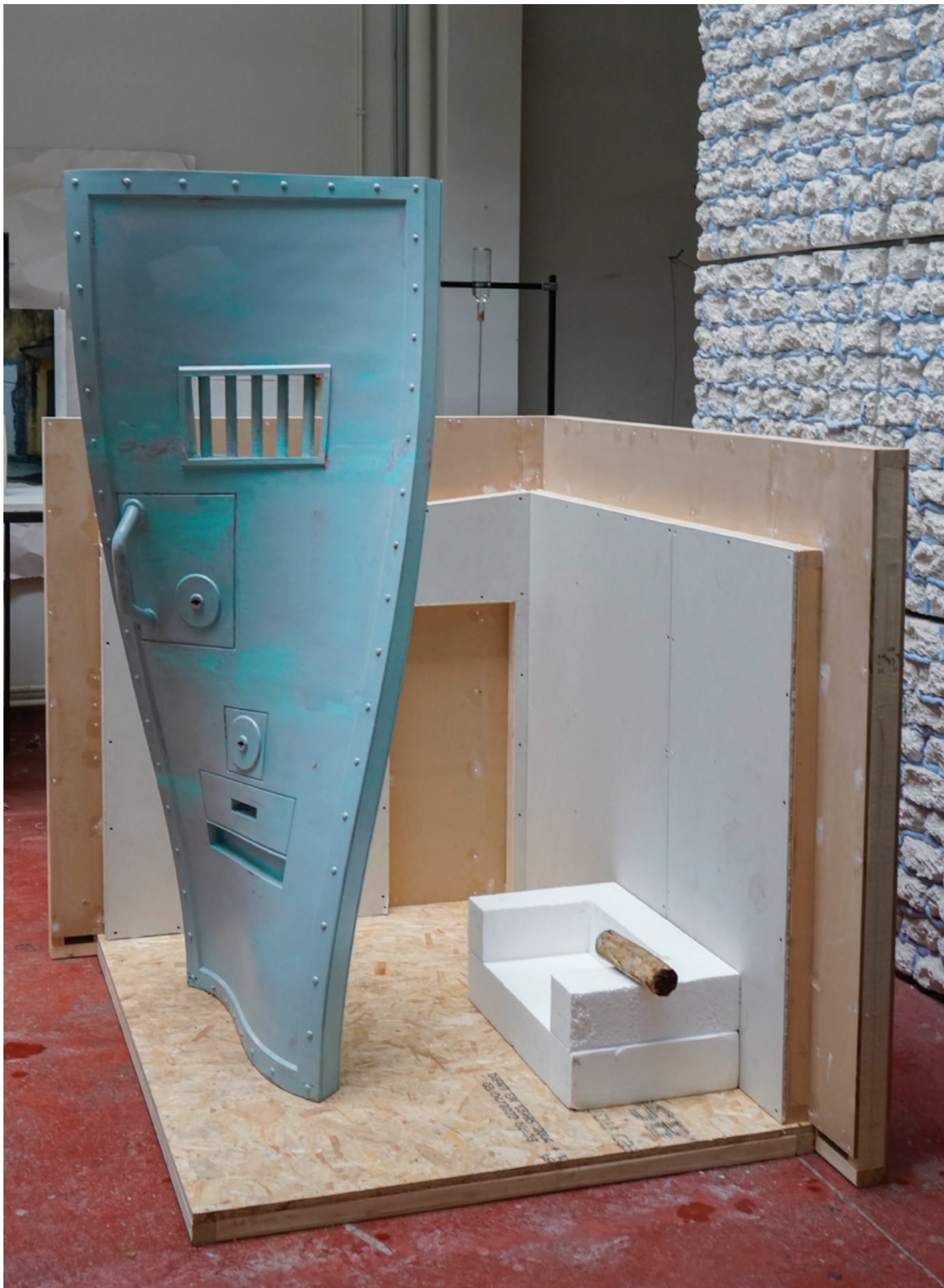
In the case of Michel François, there is a very direct link between his studio and the exhibition venue. Over recent months, the artist's studio increasingly started to mirror the rooms designed by Victor Horta. He made scale models of the rooms reserved for him (because of the fire in the roof on 18 January 2021 these were a combination of the two habitual routes). Here he arranged and rearranged miniature versions of his works, like dolls and furniture in a doll's house—or less innocent: like plastic armies on a map. In the weeks and days before the opening, he diligently continued to work. The rue de Bosnie in Saint-Gilles, where his house and studio are situated, fades into the rue Ravenstein in Brussels. The Centre for Fine Arts turns into his studio. In each of his exhibitions, François 'recycles' existing works and combines them with new ones. Each exhibition is a palimpsest in which earlier

manuscripts and the changing time show through. It is a permanent reconfiguration. Like each opera performance interprets the score and the libretto differently, François stages his work depending on the venue and the new present. He proceeds as untheatrically as possible, with minimal interventions on the stage, in order to hide as little as possible. For example, he uses the full daylight of Horta's skylights. The works and only the works must command our attention.

In the summer of 1989 Michel François joyously entered the Centre for Fine Arts on the occasion of the group exhibition *Incidents de parcours*. Shortly before the opening, in Beijing the authorities used great violence to clear Tiananmen Square; after the exhibition, the Berlin Wall came down. In 1992–1993 François had his first solo exhibition in the Centre for Fine Arts: *Le Monde et les bras—The World and the Arms*. He was invited in the antechambers around the rotunda in the Rue Royale. 'Antichambres' was a powerful exhibition programme where artists could show new work at an early stage of their careers tailored to the rooms—they were ideal rooms for living artists to enter the Centre for Fine Arts through a side entrance. As the exhibition came to an end, Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. At the Centre for Fine Arts, work of François was on view in group exhibitions such as *Look: 100 Years of Contemporary Art* (2000, Thierry De Duve), *Visionary Belgium: C'est arrivé près de chez nous* (2005, Harald Szeemann), *Treasures Old and New from Wallonia: A Curious Land* (2008, Laurent Busine) and *Danser brut* (2020, LaM, Museum Dr. Guislain & Bozar). More than thirty years after his solo debut in the Centre for Fine Arts, Michel François fully commits himself in an exhibition that provides an overview of his entire oeuvre—an exhibition that in fact does not so much look back as continues to look around attentively. Space opens up.

Welcome back, Michel François! It feels like a new beginning to have our rooms being taken over by your art.

Christophe Slagmuylder,
Director General of Bozar – Centre for Fine Arts Brussels



STUDIO Brussels, BE, 2023

THE STUDIO OF MICHEL FRANÇOIS

François Piron

For years, I have visited Michel François in his studio. Each time, I entered as a friend, that is to say, I had no specific aim in mind, nor did I come to pick out some specific work. I merely came for the pleasure of looking and for fine conversation. One of the wonderful things about this informality is that you can observe the metamorphoses, the mutations and the sedimentations of the works in progress. And there's the pleasure of seeing forms and materials return like obsessions or elastic objects—they have hardly left the studio and there they are again!

The studio is a place where time or the past don't exist. Works that originated thirty years ago simply hang or stand next to object the artist made last week. Furthermore, there's no hierarchy between them, no element of deference: the works are constantly moving—the artist puts them on the floor, hangs them on the wall, places them on all sorts of plinths. The works are waiting for a situation to be created. Nothing remains unused forever and an object that has been neglected for months can suddenly become an essential protagonist. In all corners, physical and/or chemical experiments are going on, and while for years droplets of vinegar have slowly been drilling a hole in a bloc of marble, other forms—a puddle of resin, a splatter of aluminium—are instantly created with a single gesture.

In my view, Michel François is not a designer of forms, because the forms in his studio originate from experiment and by necessity, which does not exclude improvisation. What in fact decides the form, are the gravity, the suitability of a material, the repetition of a gesture. I realise that, unlike with other artists whom I know first and foremost through their exhibitions or their books, I owe my knowledge of Michel's oeuvre to my visits to his studio. I'm familiar with his oeuvre as separate works that are scattered about, and that is why to me, this oeuvre always seems so stimulating and sensual. For indeed, the works constitute a vocabulary that never turns into a rigid phrase; they remain as close as possible to the intuition of a gesture and they function in a magnetic manner. Objects attract or repel other objects, because of affinities, proximity or capillarity. But you only need to move one magnet and the whole turns into a different composition.



STUDIO Brussels, BE, 2023



STUDIO Brussels, BE, 2020



STUDIO Brussels, BE, 2023



STUDIO Brussels, BE, 2019



STUDIO Brussels, BE, 2009

FOR MICHEL F.

Eugène Savitzkaya

What is below is above and what is above could be below. Against nature, the earth turns great nature loaded with stones, salt, minerals, living water and fire. Against the sky, the mountains and trees and the fragile silhouettes. Against nature, the whole fragility, against and in nature. Against what is fragile, nature, against the fragile being, against human fragility, the fire, the stone, the cold, the hot, salt, vinegar, wind and water. Against what is fragile, time naturally expanded or concentrated, the strata accumulated, the wood shavings, scoria, marcasite, its fibres and rays, the pyrite, emerald, gold—oh, the gold—the lead, mercury and pewter, the chasm, the vertical and horizontal rift. What must melt will melt. What must burn will burn and the forest will be underground and from the coal the volatile flammable firedamp will be released. The artist's hands work away at the ductile and the hard. With the tons of hailstones he keeps in his cold room, he considers reconstructing a glacier that time will deposit on a summit of its choice. What he has seen will be, was, is against the nature and against nature the natural sphere of time turns.

Someone lives in a corner, a recess sheltered from the wind that carries dusts and sands, against two walls, at an angle of two walls, in the recess of the brain surrounded by nature talking. Someone is at home in a corner, he will build the roof later, when time allows, a body made of microscopic beads and tight stitches pieced together in a span of nearly seventy years. Lead weighs, methane travels. The hull of the small boat dances on the billows of civilisation suffering inflammatory storms. O flames liquefying gold—oh, the gold—countering nature expanded or concentrated, in violence, modestly, gradually accumulating the materials necessary to his thought, the precious and the superfluous, flowers, fruits and grains, and the bran and the ball, and the dust deposited on all the surfaces of the natural globe against the emptiness with all its aerial sides, against the fire with all its subterranean sides. What is above resembles what is below, and what is below resembles what is above.

Translated by
Catherine Petit and Paul Buck



Panoptique

[Panopticon]

Virtual

Big data

Institution

Mediatisation

Capture

Immediacy

Control

Selfie

Self control

Optics

Surveillance

Narcissism

Reflections

Vanity

Bubble image

Construction

Tower

Instrumentation

Telephony

Symmetry

Confusion

Scenery

Blind spot

Upside down

Corporate

Paradox

When Michel François

presents video footage of the mud volcanoes in Azerbaijan on large, wall-mounted flatscreens, he infuses processes initially begun millions of years ago into the immediacy of digital on-screen communication, opening up the acceleration of current time to the vastness of geological time scales. With the video installation of the mud volcanoes, François hybridises a natural landform created (and altered) by the eruptions of mud, slurry, water and gases with the epitome of the contemporary mediated world within which nature and reality are no longer accessible, experienced directly. The video footage displayed on hi-tech screens continues François's sculptural production of habitat-like systems where organic and inorganic, natural and man-made, expansive and imploded elements are welded together within an ambiguous state of both synergy and conflict. The video installation also provides an example of François's exchange between images and materials. In François's works, photographic images appear in space as physical presences while perpetuating a performative sculptural instant and arrangements of material elements culminate in sculptural images, sculptural scenes.

350 of the 700 mud volcanoes of the world are in Azerbaijan. They serve as an indication of rich deposits of oil and gas in their vicinity, which the country is known for. This makes François's video installation of the mud volcanoes a metonym of the matter that conditions all matters, the matter that fuels (or muddles) world politics and economy. It also echoes the energy crisis the world is facing due to the war in Ukraine, exposing the (never fully) isolated space of art to the turbulence of the global historical present. Although the video installation utilises the visual rhetoric of what Guy Debord called *The Society of the Spectacle*, it does so not as a means to screen reality, but to reveal the true picture of the material reality that lies behind the capitalist spectacle. The bubbly topography of the mud volcanoes, with their shiny opacity, reflects the cameraman taking the footage, internalising his image. It manifests their consumptive power to impose themselves, the fact that they can never be contained.

When Michel François

erects the central observation tower of the panopticon, the type of institutional building designed in the late eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham to control and supervise the inmates populating it, he covers it in mirrors reflecting the architecture in which it is placed and the image of the visitors. The reflectivity of the mirrored tower is linked to the reflective mud volcanoes surrounding it. As the video installation is reminiscent of a control room, the mirrored tower recasts the room as a prison of sorts, implementing an affinity between the space of art and the underlying, suppressed structure of political and legal orders. On the one hand, the mirrored tower undermines the function of the panopticon, sealing it off and eliminating the position of the human guard inside it; yet, on the other hand, it intensifies it, internalising the image of the visitor, who in turn internalises the function of the panopticon as an inner guard. However, the reflection of the visitors displaces, virtualises and multiplies their own image, undermining the possibility of capturing them, singling them out.

PHOTOGRAPH/POSTER La Tour [The Tower], 1999





Panoptique

INSTALLATION *Panoptique* [Panopticon] (detail), 2021. Exhibition *After Party*, Halle Verrière and CIAY, Meisenthal, FR



[Panopticon]

PHOTOGRAPH / POSTER *Mud Volcano* (detail), 2022



INSTALLATION *Golden Hours*, 2009–2021. Exhibition *After Party*, Halle Verrière and CIAY, Meisenthal, FR. Collab. Ann Veronica Janssens



DOCUMENT *Baku*, AZ, 2022



Panoptique

INSTALLATION Exhibition *Panopticon*, 2022, YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, AZ



[Panopticon]

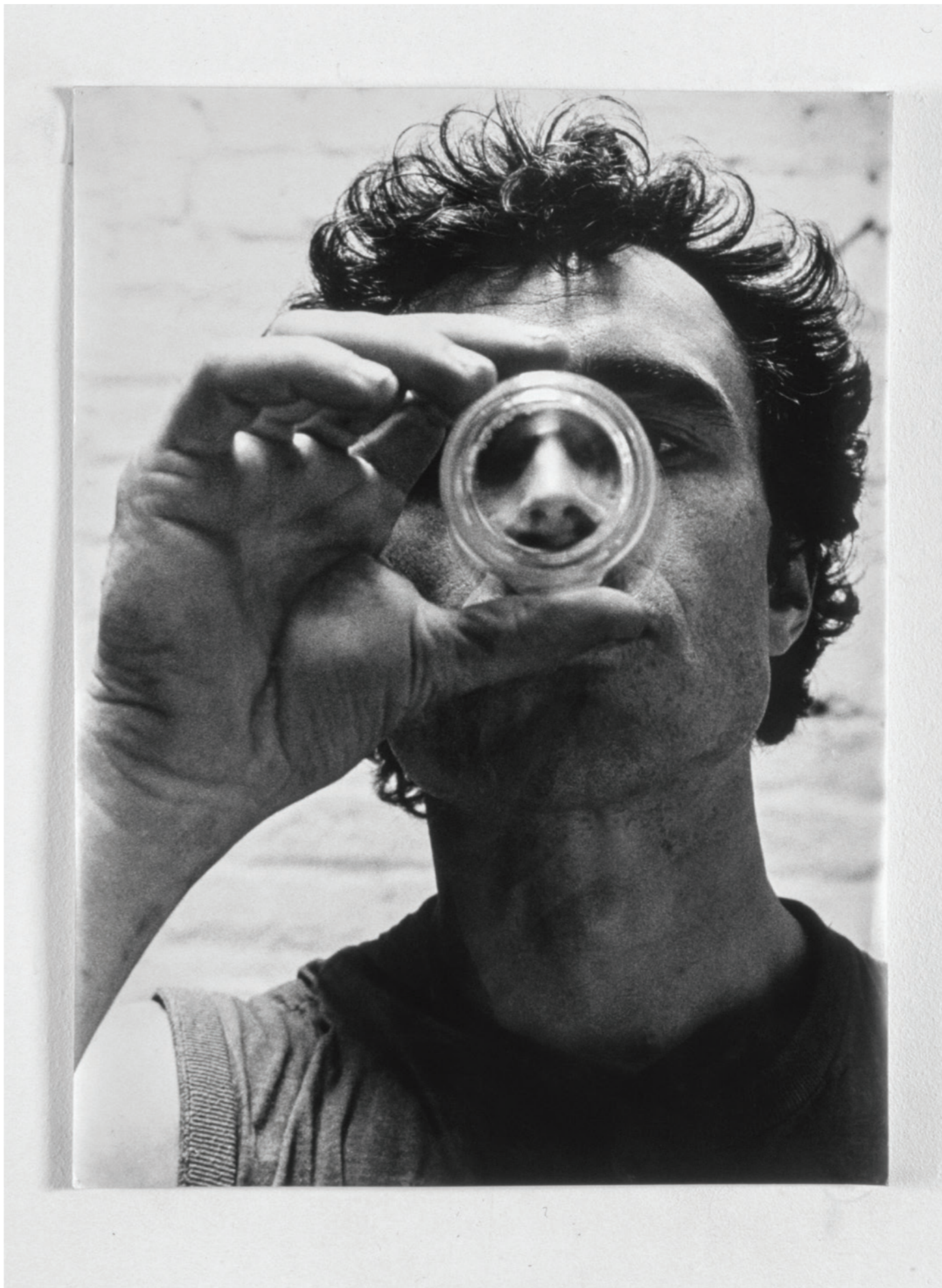
INSTALLATION Exhibition *Panopticon*, 2022, YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku, AZ



DOCUMENT Baku, AZ, 2022

SCULPTURE *Lost Peanuts (Aluminium)*, 2022. Aluminium, 120 x 60 cm





PHOTOGRAPH *Autoportrait au verre* [Self-Portrait with Glass], 1988

