

QUELLE AVENTURE!





JACQUELINE
MESMAEKER

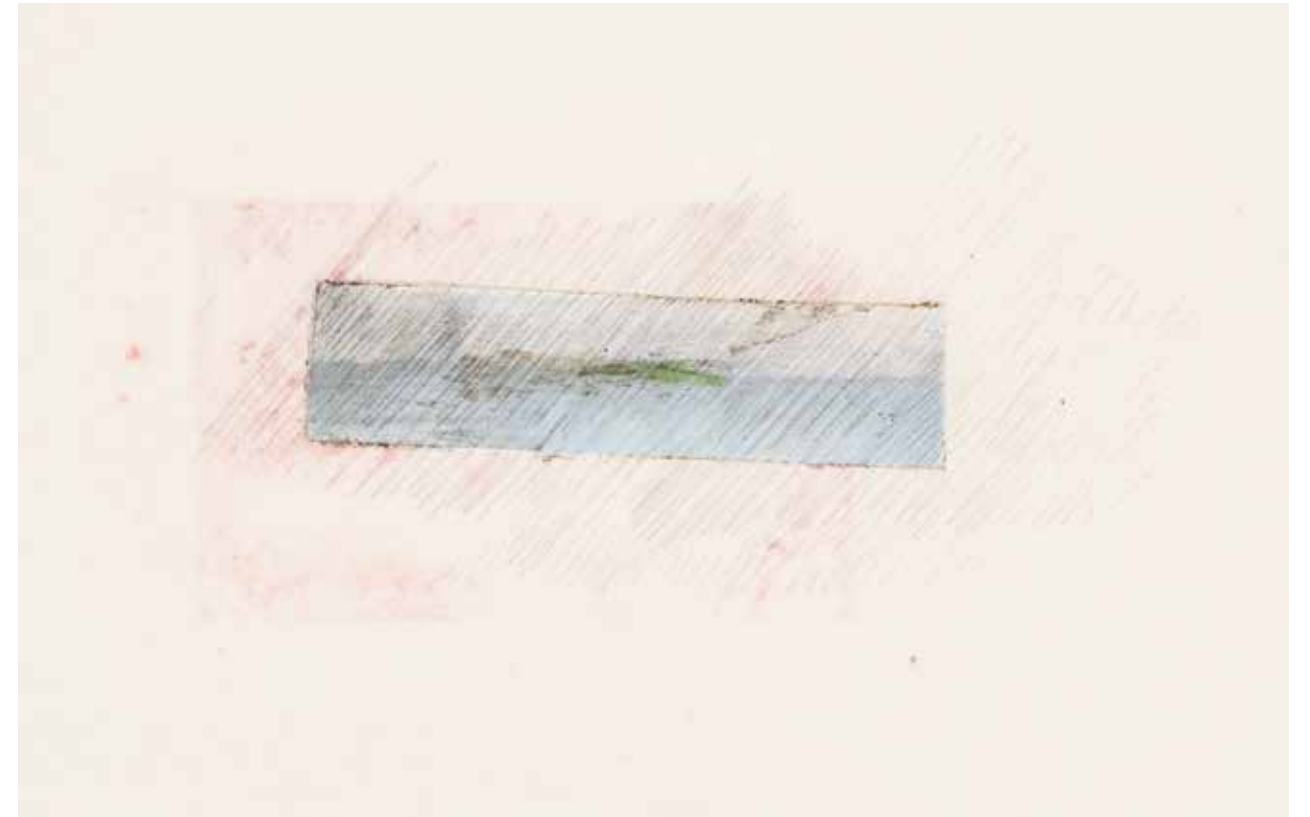
QUELLE
AVENTURE!

MER. B&L

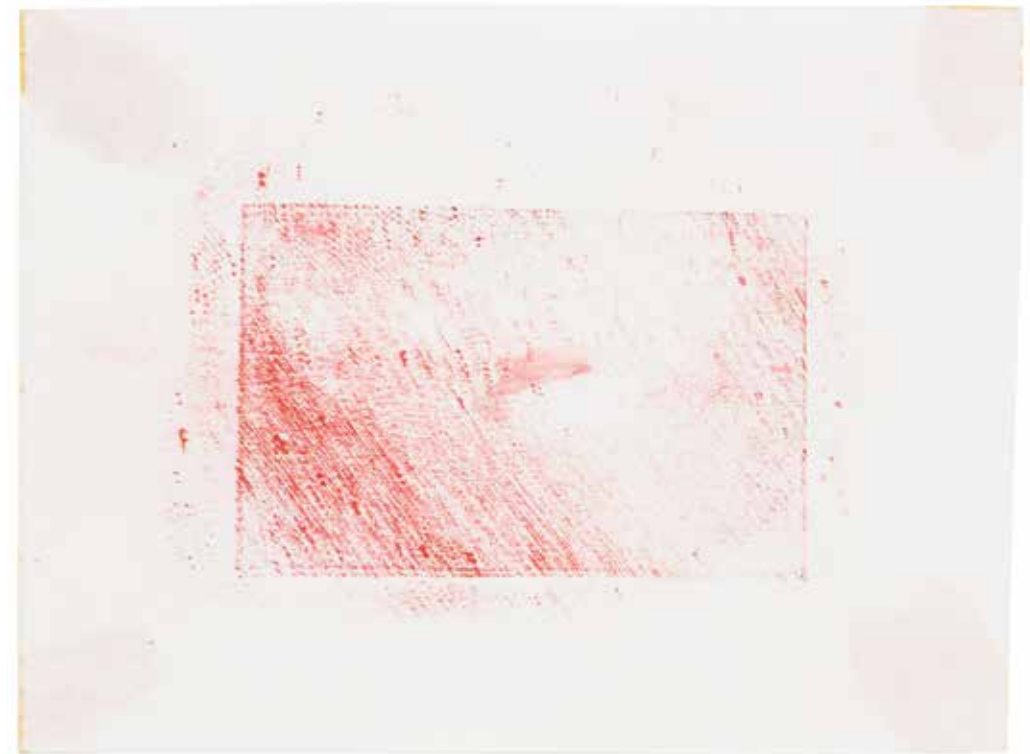
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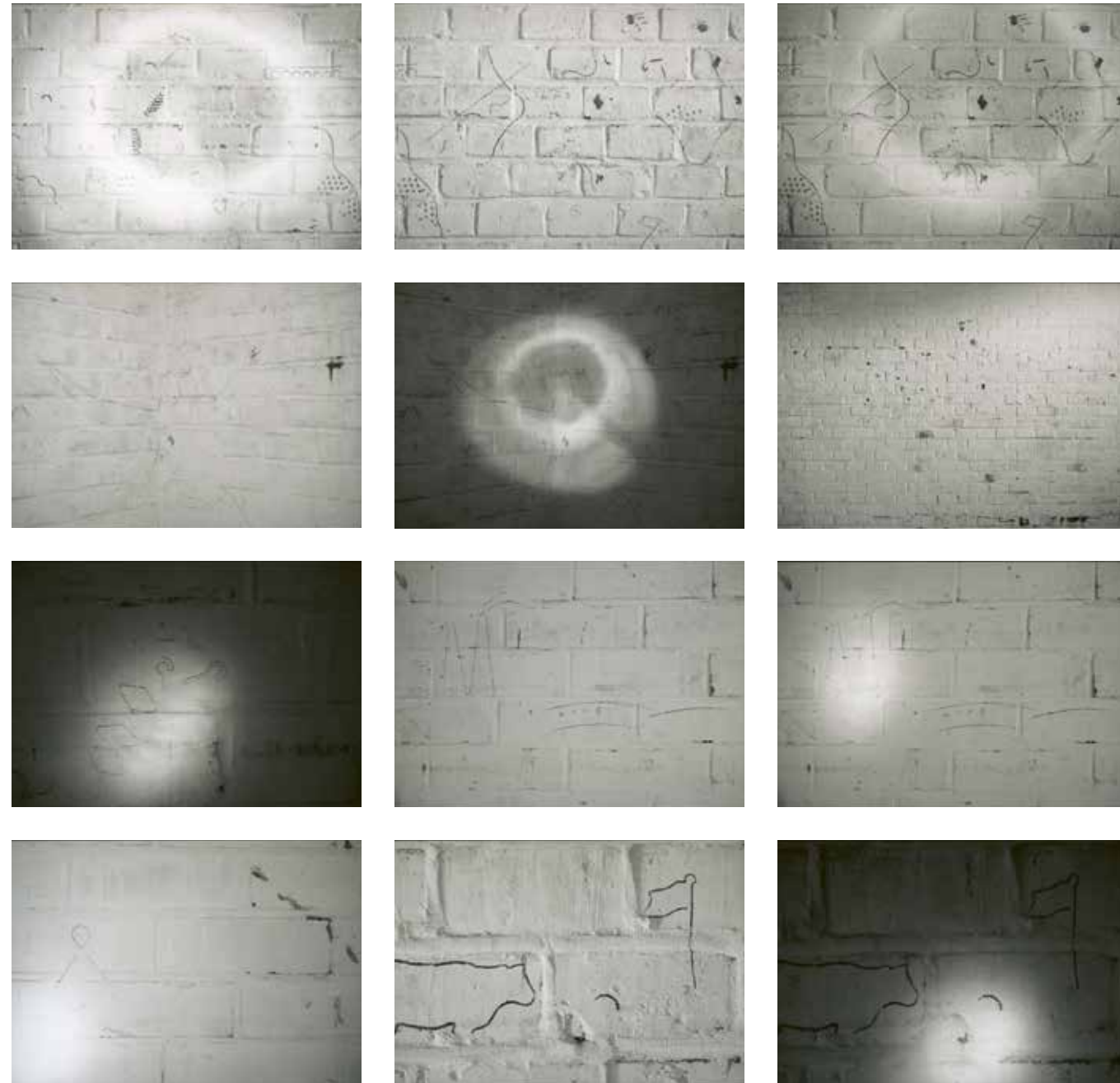
Carnets de Bateaux, 1978



Carnets de Bateaux, 1978







Details of: *Contours Clandestins*. In situ pencil drawings, La Glacière de Saint-Gilles, Brussels, 1995.

YOU HAVE NO OTHER CHOICE BUT TO LIVE¹

ANNE PONTÉGNIE

*I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know.*

— Emily Dickinson, "I am nobody, Who are you?"

Being invited to write about the work of Jacqueline Mesmaeker brought about the realisation that certain transformations, which have affected my relationship with art in recent years, had not yet made their way into my way of writing. Such is the unexpected power of this body of work, which—despite and also because of its unobtrusiveness—compels all those who are interested in it to doubt themselves.

The oeuvre of Jacqueline Mesmaeker resists the dominant narratives that have long allowed the advances of modern and contemporary art to align on a tidy and straight path of progress and emancipation. *Avant-garde, autonomy, innovation, rupture, genius*—all these terms are part of the vocabulary that we have used to establish the hierarchies and to justify the pyramidal system upon which the stability of institutions rests. It was necessary to separate authentic from inauthentic, original from copy, art from craft, innovation from tradition, professional from amateur. Art became the evidence of the validity of the modern project, and of its bottomless capacity to destroy and to invent—proof of progress in action. It is pointless to backtrack to the moment when this narrative was first thrown into crisis; it has always been in crisis. As Bruno Latour has demonstrated for the sciences in *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes (We Have Never Been Modern)*², there have always been objects that escape the divisions upon which modernity is based, but how can we perceive these objects when we are "caught" in a conceptual construction that denies the very possibility of them?

In recent years we have seen the narrative of Western modernity cracking all over to allow a multitude of ideas, artists, and objects to escape, remaining invisible to those who can only look straight ahead into the distance. Learning to look in other directions is no easy thing; it's a question of a particular kind of training, in which Jacqueline Mesmaeker's oeuvre plays a part. One of her films is called *J'ai vu que tu n'as pas vu (I saw what you did not see)*. When I met up with Jacqueline Mesmaeker before



J'ai vu que tu n'as pas vu, 2006–2011. Video stills

writing this text, she repeated to me, for several times: 'Have you seen *J'ai vu que tu n'as pas vu*?' I took this as a gentle admonishment: why had I waited for so long to see her work, even though it was so nearby? The strategies that Jacqueline Mesmaeker uses might suggest that she seeks, in fact, to not be seen. I am thinking of the *Introductions Roses*, for which she fills an interstice with folded pink fabric, or of the *Contours Clandestins* where she draws, right on the wall, an object or a figure that underlines the surface's small flaws or irregularities. Often hidden in the architecture of the exhibition spaces—staircases, bathrooms, baseboards, or along the length

1. Jacqueline Mesmaeker, interview with Michel Verlinden, "Jacqueline Mesmaeker inaugure la réouverture de Bozar," *Bruzz*, 28 May 2020.
2. Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1991).

18 of a hosepipe—these two gestures are invisible, unless they are accorded serious attention.³ This restraint, which Jacqueline Mesmaeker uses as a tool, not only invites us to look elsewhere and to look differently, but it also questions, with humour and cheekiness, the authority that other works use to capture our gaze.

In the middle of the 1970s, Jacqueline Mesmaeker decided to take up again her studies in visual arts at La Cambre. Having already received a degree in applied and decorative arts in the 1950s, she needed a fine art diploma to be able to teach classes in higher education. This stage of her training certainly played a role in the artistic style that she was defining more and more in that moment, but it seems to me that we have to take into account the period that preceded it in order to better understand the artist she became. In the years following her first phase of training, Jacqueline Mesmaeker worked in industrial and textile design, did research for the Design Center de Bruxelles, and was a stylist and pattern maker for the department store L'Innovation, for a textiles company, and for a hosiery company in Leuze and Flanders. Facing the need to make a living, she led a life of creation in anonymity, subject to the commercial and industrial demands of her clients. Few traces of those creations remain today, but I am certain that in them there would have been found many of the qualities of the body of work that she later developed. This is shown by the moment that often symbolises the transition from one era of her career to another: the wallpapers (1974). For its hundredth anniversary, the company U.P.L.⁴ organised an open contest to design its *Domani 77* collection of wallpaper. For this occasion, Jacqueline Mesmaeker designed a series of patterns between abstraction and the natural world, in faded colours that leaned towards the invisible, from sea greens to evanescent pinks. In this moment she comes out of obscurity, she is celebrated in the press, she has a name. Jacqueline Mesmaeker did not all of a sudden become an artist because of a diploma, nor because she had begun to participate in exhibitions and formalise her ideas outside of the realm of applied arts. She became an artist because her circumstances gradually allowed her to. Her children had grown up, and her salary as a professor allowed her to get an apartment “of her own”⁵; later, her retirement from teaching would free up her time. Jacqueline Mesmaeker, like many other woman artists, is wary of feminist interpretations of her body of work. It's understandable that, after having won, through major effort, the chance to participate in the aesthetic discourse, women artists want to see their language understood in its specificity, apart from the question of gender. There are a great number of

women artists of Jacqueline Mesmaeker's generation who have waited for a long time—not to benefit from the same considerations accorded to their male contemporaries, but simply to be seen. Born, like Jacqueline Mesmaeker, in the 1920s, Carol Rama, Maria Lassnig, Carla Accardi, Shirley Jaffe, and Marisa Merz are a few of the many artists who only recently received that consideration, and an, at best, local and limited public reception. Their bodies of work do not resemble one another, but they do share a dissidence regarding the dominant aesthetic vocabularies of that time. These women accept the codes of those dominant vocabularies, while at the same time hijacking and appropriating them, digging subterranean spaces beneath them and setting them aflame, in a controlled burn that will take decades to consume them, eventually allowing these voices, intact and vital, to emerge from the ashes. If the oeuvres of these women artists⁶ emerge today, it is not because of quotas, nor because of institutional obligations, but because of their ability to puncture the linear narrative of modernity, to dismantle the hierarchies and redefine the criteria that have long left women on the margins.

Jacqueline Mesmaeker chooses to slip into the existing state of affairs; she picks out the details from it and creates rhythms and juxtapositions from them, she recomposes or arranges them. A sense of adventure⁷ is everywhere in them: in the crack (*une faille*, in French) in a wall (*Mademoiselle de la Faille* or *Déchirure* [Tear]), in books (*Secret Outlines*, 1996), in postcards (*Les Péripéties* [Fate-Chance Events], 2012–2018), in a photocopier (*Les Lucioles* [Fireflies], 2011), in a football match (*Surface de Réparation* [Penalty Box], 1979), in a memory of a greenhouse (*La Serre* [The Greenhouse] de *Charlotte et Maximilien*, 1977), in a bottle of water (*La Pêche à la Lumière* [Fishing with Light], 2007). She mends, she outlines, she pays attention. Thus she brings us to understand that art need not turn the tables, transgress the rules, destroy, or criticise in order to make sense, but that it can also be used to make space, to listen, and to take care. Art can help us, in an existential continuity and flow, to live.

At the end of the 1960s, conceptual art introduced a distance between artistic expression and dexterity, using tools like the video, the photograph, the typewriter, and the document. Jacqueline Mesmaeker also uses these tools. They liberate her from a too-strict definition of what it is to be an artist, and allow her to slip almost imperceptibly into the existing state of affairs, but she diverts these codes away from the systems and the formal neutrality with which this kind of language is often associated. This is a minoritarian



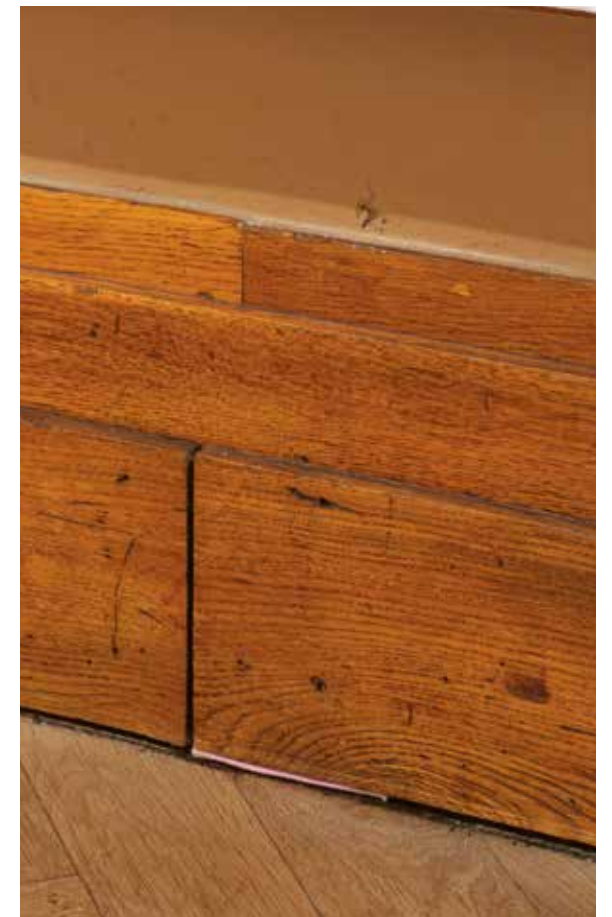
3. 'Ten years later, we were still discovering drawings in the dark corners of the women's restroom,' Lynda Morris explains, about Jacqueline Mesmaeker's participation in the exhibition *EASTinternational* in Norwich in 1993. Morris, "War Long Memories," in: *Jacqueline Mesmaeker, Œuvres 1975–2011*, ed. Olivier Mignon (Brussels: Éditions (SIC) & couper ou pas couper, 2011).

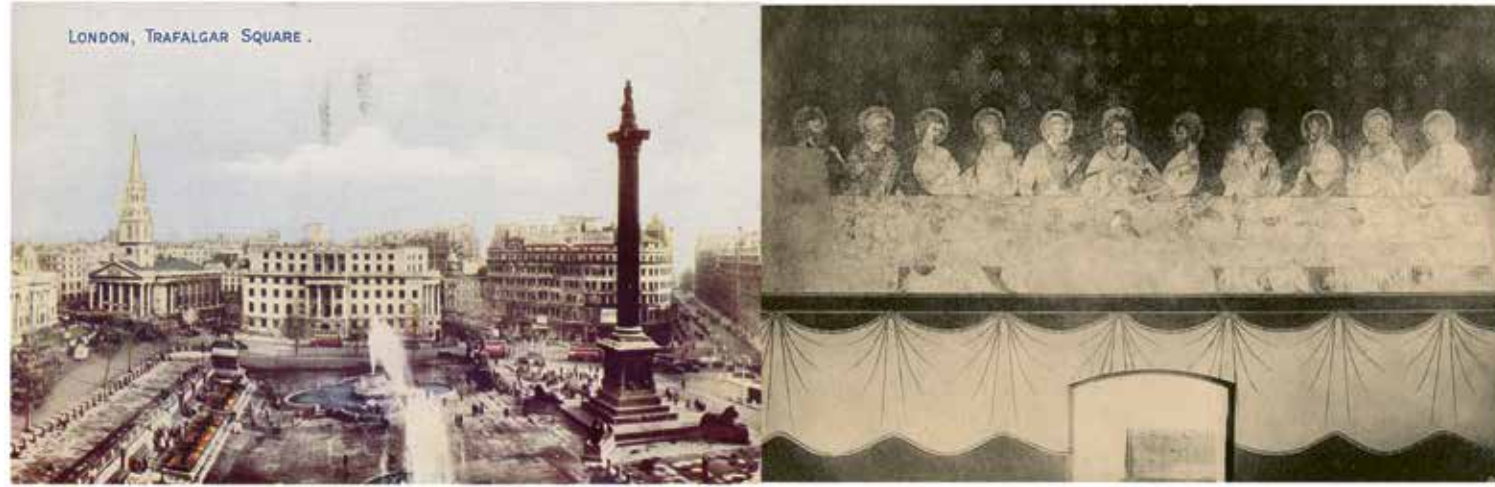
4. One of the biggest wallpaper factories in the world, located in Haren, Belgium; it closed its doors in 1979.

5. In an echo of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, it was because of her relocating to a subsidised apartment, where she still lives, that Jacqueline Mesmaeker began to fully develop her artistic practice.

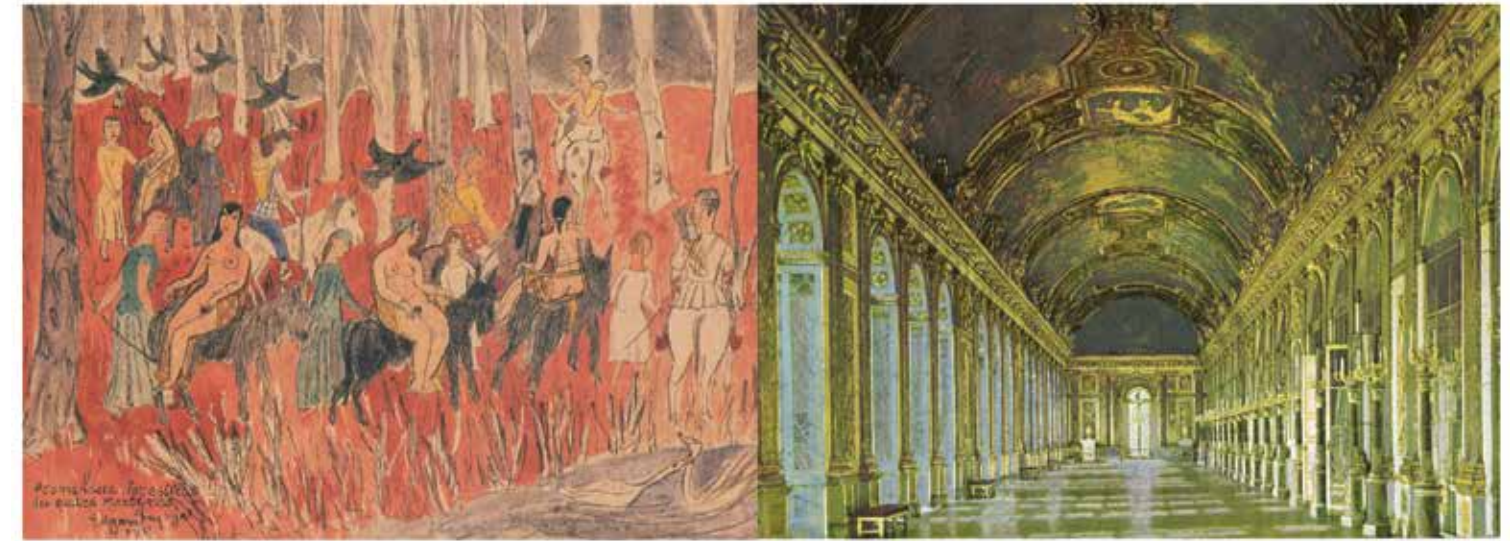
6. This also applies to many other minority voices, of course: self-taught artists, non-Western artists, artists of the applied arts...

7. *Ah, Quelle Aventure!* (*Ah, What an Adventure!*).

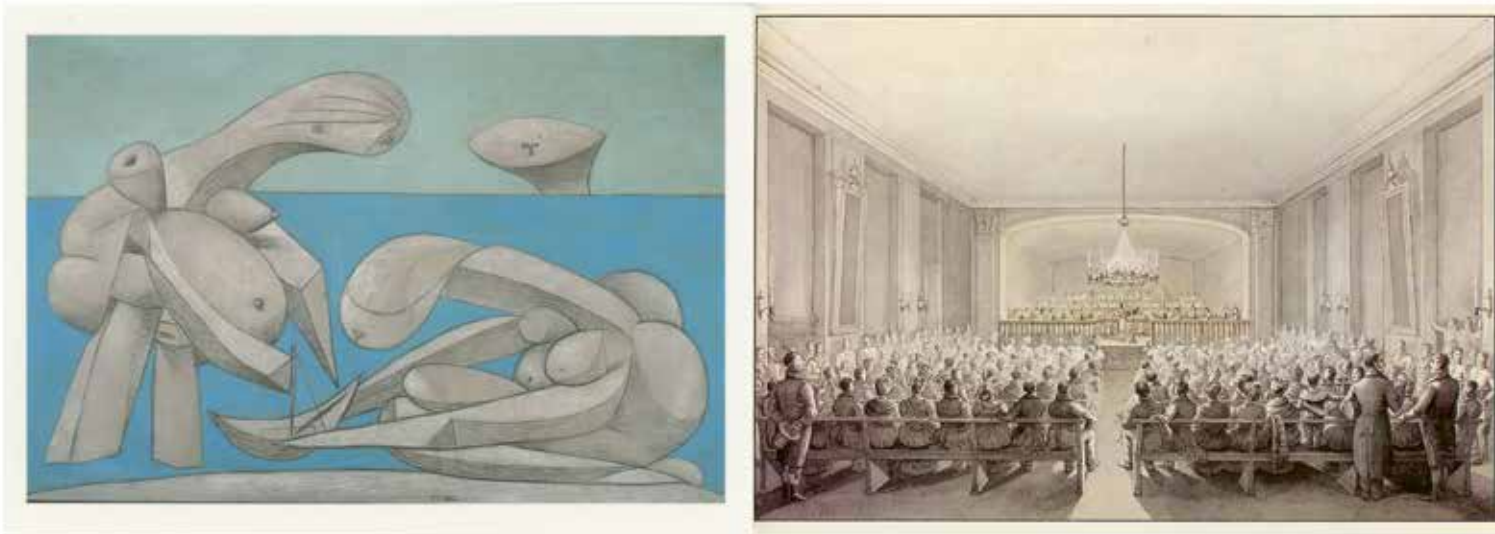




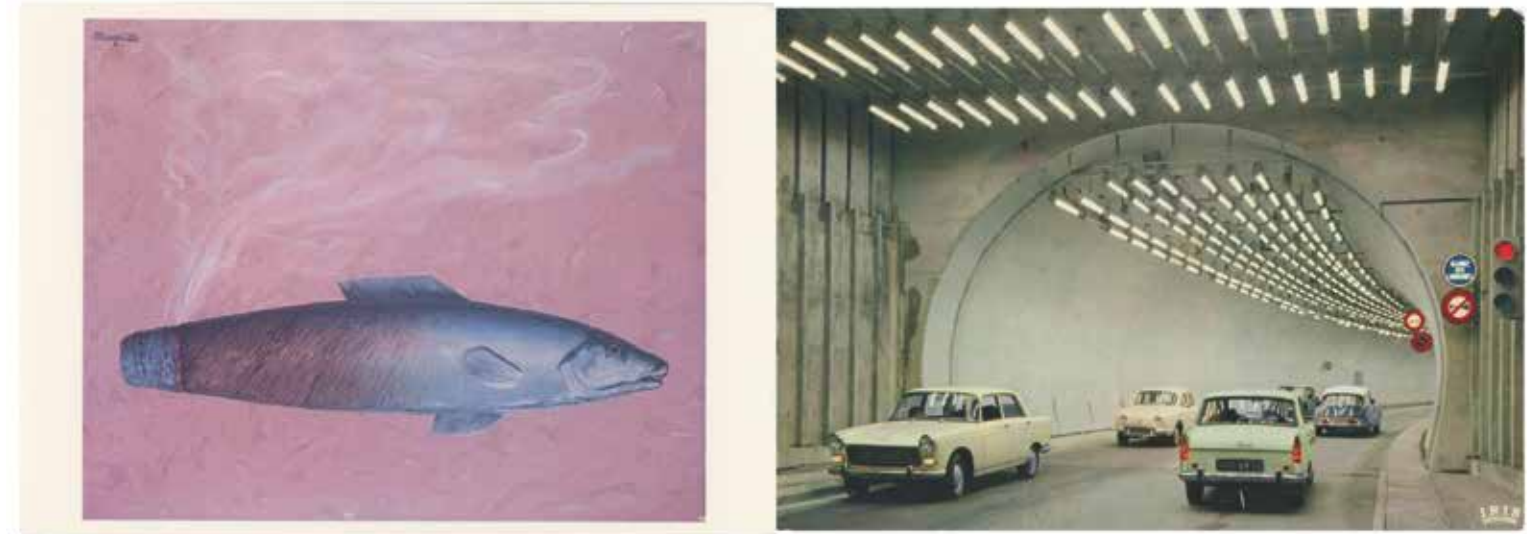
Les Péripéties, 2012–2018
 Trafalgar Square, London / La Cène, Abbaye de la Sainte Vierge exposée dans le musée de la Byloke à Gand



Les Péripéties, 2012–2018
 Edgard Tytgat, *Promenade Forestière des Quatre Martyres*, 1955 / Château de Versailles, Galerie des Glaces



Les Péripéties, 2012–2018
 Pablo Picasso, *La Baignade*, 1937 / Orchestra concert presented in The Hague, c. 1820



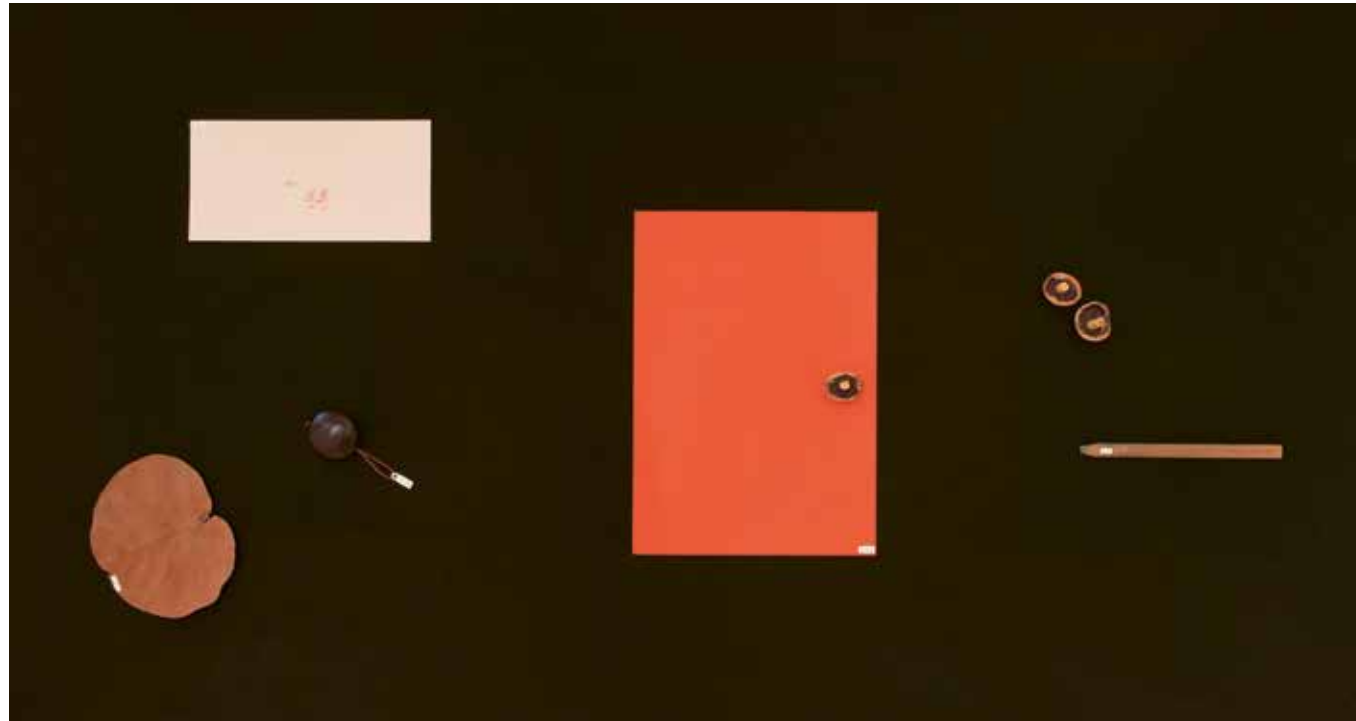
Les Péripéties, 2012–2018
 René Magritte, *L'Exception*, 1963 / Chamonix, tunnel du Mont Blanc



17 Doutes, 1992



Stèle, 1989-2020



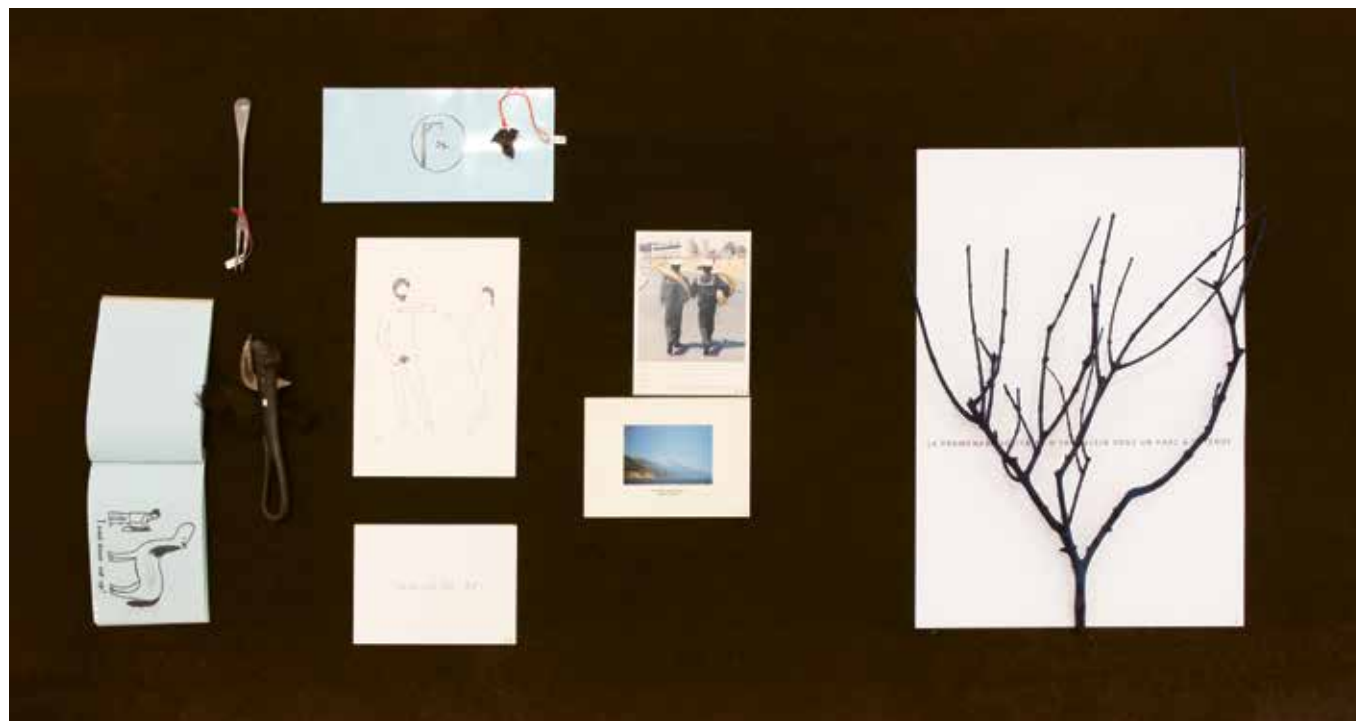
Le Salon des Placards, 2013

124. Walter Swennen, Galerie Cyan, Liège, 1996 / 199. Feuille trouvée dans un jardin botanique / 13. Fève ou noyau d'une plante ou d'un arbre exotique non identifié; Bolivie ou Inde / 103. Improvisation, Texte J. Mesmaeker / 15. Petits bateaux / 14. Crayon ayant servi à écrire 263 mots



Le Salon des Placards, 2013

67. Piero Manzoni, Merda d'artista / 29. Valentin à gauche / 98. Piero Manzoni, Galerie Marie-Puck Broodthaers / 44. Gilbert & George, *The Red Sculpture*, 1985 / 102. Roy Lichtenstein, *Landscape*, 1973. Carte postale de Jo Delahaut / 143. Tâpies, Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1982 / 11. Pomme en cage éditée par Danese, Milan. Danese était un éditeur de design à Milan, dans les années 1950, comprenant les designers Enzo Mari, Bruno Munari et Angelo Mangiarotti / 185. Faire-part de naissance, Japon / 166. Walid Raad & Akram Zaatari, Studio Soussi Portrait Index / 19. Gilbert & George, *verre de Lynda Morris*, 1973 / 84. James Lee Byars: *The Letter Reading Society*, 1897 / 187. Felice Casorati, *Conversazione platonica*, 1925



Le Salon des Placards, 2013

167. *Samanta's Horses* – Drawings and comments discovered by her mother in waste baskets and on cupboard shelves. Edited by Elisabeth Ross-Turner / 7. Fourchette à escargot / 9. Ouvre-boîte de concentré de bœuf / 87. Walter Swennen, Galerie Nadja Vilenne, 2001 / 95. Marcel Duchamp, Galerie Lempertz, 1991 / 33. Robert Filliou, *Do as you like* / 20. Châtaigne d'eau, se retrouve dans les eaux calmes du continent asiatique, leur croissance est exponentielle et menaçante / 172. Francis Alÿs & Honoré δ'O, Duett, 1999, Espace 251 Nord, Biennale de Venise / 115. Babis Kandilaptis, *Iconomachie comme guerre civile*, 1990 / 12. La promenade solitaire d'Yves Klein dans un parc à Ostende



Le Salon des Placards, 2013

97. Marcel Broodthaers, Galerie Christine et Isy Brachot, 1990, Bruxelles / 161. Boutique du musée de Villeneuve d'Ascq / 173. Nicéphore Niepce, premier instantané / 153. Peter Downsbrough, 1993 / 108. Birgit Pelzer, enveloppes / 37. Groep 0, februari 2000 / 160. Boutique du musée de Villeneuve d'Ascq / 180. Ex-voto église orthodoxe de Bucarest, perles rouges et soie bleue; couleur de la force spirituelle. Le triangle équilatéral est la représentation de la Trinité Divine, de la Mer sans tempête, du Ciel, de la Bonté, de la Pureté / 154. Daniel Buren, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1981 / 39. Hanne Darboven, artiste allemande, † avant la fin de l'an 2000 / 126. Rose cueillie en janvier 2000 derrière la chapelle du cimetière Picpus à Paris / 182. Jean Raine à son mariage (photo Marcel Broodthaers)



La Serre de Charlotte et Maximilien, 1977–2020



Épisode, 2010. Installation view, *Le Miroir et les Chemins*, MACS, Grand-Hornu, 2012

Dans ces premières installations vidéo, il s'agit pour Jacqueline Mesmaeker, de désorienter tant le support que le spectateur. Ainsi en va-t-il également des *Antipodes* (1979) ou l'art de se projeter en plein océan Pacifique en captant la mer du Nord. Jacqueline Mesmaeker imagine une projection cinématographique très rapprochée et inversée: mer – ciel dans un petit tableau à fond bleu uni, une marine renversée en son petit encadrement ouragé. «Je me demande si je vais traverser la terre d'un bout à l'autre, s'interroge Alice et Lewis Carroll. Cela sera rudement drôle d'arriver au milieu de ces gens qui marchent la tête en bas! On les appelle les Antipattes, je crois». Voilà une poétique façon d'interroger le médium filmique et son support, de concilier le cinéma et la peinture. Oui, c'est elle, la peinture, que Jacqueline Mesmaeker recherche, et cela restera une constante dans toute son œuvre vidéographique, même sans désorienter le support. Filmer c'est capter, projeter c'est peindre. Tout est dit.

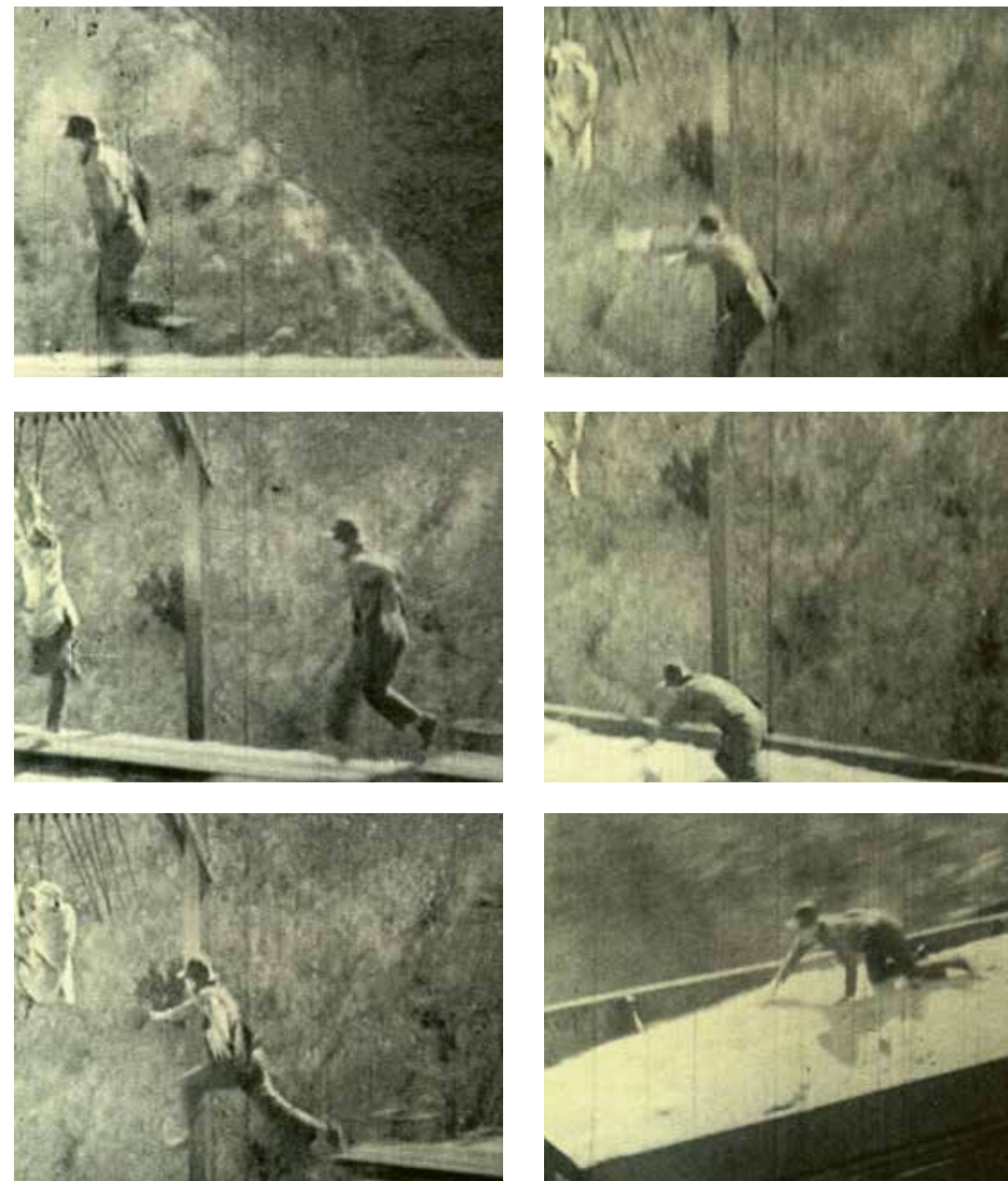
Je reviens une dernière fois aux notes de l'artiste, à ce vertige ainsi créé. «Je pense à un plafond italien en trompe-l'œil, écrit Jacqueline Mesmaeker: au fond d'un espace clos de pierres et de plantes on voit, par une grande déchirure qui pourrait être une haute fenêtre ou un toit effondré, des oiseaux voler dans le ciel. Pour les voir ainsi le peintre était probablement au fond d'un espace et parfois cependant on imagine qu'il aurait pu lui-même peindre en volant pour tenter d'être à la hauteur des oiseaux». Voilà un autoportrait du peintre en trapéziste, un peintre qui se projetterait en mouvements et qui n'aurait de cesse de remuer afin de peindre les multiples envols d'une multitude de mouettes.

allusie op de grote rechthoek voor het doel van de doelwachter – en was bedoeld voor een tentoonstelling die zou doorgaan in een voormalige Sarma in Doornik. De tentoonstelling ging echter nooit door. De films belandden in de kast, maar werden in 2009 door Mesmaeker bewerkt voor de video *I'm a foot fan*. Het is pas dit jaar (2020) dat ze het oorspronkelijke project kan realiseren ter gelegenheid van de tentoonstelling *Ah, Quelle Aventure!* De kunstenaar over dit project: 'Het is een deconstructie van het voetbalspel. Op tien schermen van zijden tule worden in een lus ballen geprojecteerd die eenzaam door de ruimte bewegen, van links naar rechts en van rechts naar links. Loodrecht op die gelaagde schermen staan er twee lichtdoorlatende schermen waarop beelden geprojecteerd worden van spelers die voetbal spelen zonder bal. Ze raken alleen maar een bal toevallig, naargelang de projectie.' In feite gaan de ballen in alle richtingen door de tule schermen – zoals Mickey door de ruiten van de serre gaat – en raken ze het net, terwijl de spelers onhandig in de leegte trappen. Is er een speler die de bal zal raken terwijl de films in een lus blijven spelen? Jawel, zoals Muriel Andrin opmerkt,¹² de cinematografische registratie is tenslotte bedrieglijk, want paradoxaal genoeg stelt Jacqueline Mesmaeker alles in het werk om de opname te laten ontsnappen aan alle controle door 'verwikkelingen', onverwachte incidenten, kleine wendingen die het werk én onze waarneming ondermijnen.

In haar eerste video-installaties probeerde Mesmaeker zowel de drager als de kijker te desoriënteren. Dat doet ze ook in *Les Antipodes* (1979), of de kunst om zich in de Stille Oceaan te projecteren door de Noordzee te filmen. Het werk is een filmprojectie van zeer dichtbij op een klein, monochroom blauw schilderij, een omgekeerd zeegezicht gevat in een gesculpteerde lijst. 'Ik vraag me af of ik *dwars* door de aarde heen zal vallen,' reflecteren Alice en Lewis Carroll. 'Wat zal het gek zijn om uit te komen bij de mensen die met hun hoofden omlaag lopen! De Antipathieën, geloof ik.' Een bijzonder poëtische manier om het medium film en zijn drager te verkennen, om film en de schilderkunst te verzoenen! Want het is inderdaad de schilderkunst die Jacqueline Mesmaeker verkent en dat blijft een constante in haar videowerk, ook als ze de drager niet ondermijnt. Filmen is vastleggen, projecteren is schilderen. Daarmee is alles gezegd.

Ik keer nog een laatste keer terug naar de nota's van de kunstenaar, naar de verwarring die ze creëert. 'Ik denk aan een Italiaans trompe-l'œilplafond,' schrijft ze. 'Achter een ruimte die afgesloten is met stenen en planten ziet men door een grote opening – misschien een hoog venster of een ingestort plafond – vogels vliegen in de lucht. Om die vogels zo te kunnen zien, bevond de schilder zich waarschijnlijk achteraan de ruimte, maar soms beeld je je in dat hij ze kan geschilderd hebben terwijl hij zelf rondvloog in de lucht, om zich op dezelfde hoogte te bevinden als de vogels.' Ziedaar een zelfportret van de schilder als trapezist, een schilder die zich projecteert in bewegingen, die onophoudelijk in beweging is om de talrijke vluchten van een massa meeuwen te schilderen.

12. In Olivier Mignon, op. cit., p.234.



Épisode, 2010. Video stills



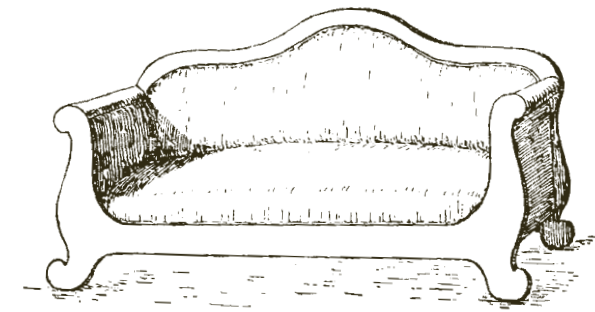
Lire et Écrire, 2005

LETTERS, GLANCES, IMAGES

ON SOME, AMONG OTHER THINGS, OF JACQUELINE MESMAEKER'S READINGS

(A REPORT)

MICHEL BAUDSON



I. 'IT FITTED'

In one of our unexpected conversations shortly before the opening of her exhibition in the Cultural Centre Strombeek, Jacqueline Mesmaeker emphasised, almost point-blank and with an insistence that seemed inspired by the urgency to come to the point, how important her *premier livre* had been for her. It was a book that as a five-year-old she had received on her first day at the small school in this watchmakers' village in the Swiss mountains, where her father had sent her for health reasons. Upon her arrival at the school, her future teacher had taken her to the room where she would sleep under a red duvet cover. First, her teacher had rubbed her with spirits of camphor to alleviate the shock and the fatigue of the voyage and handed her the book. This was the book with which she would learn to read. It woke her interest in the meaning of images. She discovered lists and columns with words. And the book directed the reader's attention to differences in sound by visualising vowels and consonants. To date, the book has lost nothing of its magic. In the course of this first year at school amidst nature, it would open her mind and stimulate her curiosity and hunger for discoveries and reading. The book has never left her, and today it still occupies a central place in her flat-studio-library, where she carefully preserves all sorts of souvenirs, objects, archives, works of art and relics, moments of *j'ai vu* that continue to fill her rich life.

She also emphasises the quality of the printed letters from that time, of the layout of the books, and how these were used to link image and word. In the wonderful way the meaning of words was expressed, she sees parallels with Marcel Broodthaers's works, with which she would become familiar in the 1960s.

In the course of our desultory conversation, Mesmaeker tells me about a second memory from her childhood. At home, two Bolivian students who studied at Brussels University lodged with the family. A few months after she had returned to Brussels—she was eight by then—she accompanied these two students on a camping trip around the countryside of Central Europe and Northern Italy in the summer holidays. When they were back in Brussels, her parents and she brought the two to the port of Antwerp, where her two soulmates boarded a ship with which they sailed back to South America. She would never see them again, and she has heartbreaking memories of this farewell.



A Childhood, 2011. Cover

116 She has another experience of a painful separation in 1945. Jacqueline Mesmaeker is present when ‘two RAF pilots in their blue uniform’ board a military plane to return home—mission accomplished. The two had been invited at their table several times when they stayed in a military camp in Brussels after the liberation. ‘At the time, it was customary to invite “liberators” at home.’ For Christmas, Smithy, the youngest of the two, gave her a second book: Francesca Allinson’s *A Childhood*. This time, the book would mark her teenage years, as she writes in the afterword of a reissue:

Was it a sort of talisman, a precious object that protected me? [...] The book separated my childhood from adulthood. Many years later, in 1996, on the occasion of an exhibition in the Collective Gallery in Edinburgh, memories of this time of my life came back. I wanted to pay tribute to the book and to the man who gave it to me by leaving traces at the exhibition, of the book’s typography as well as its fantasy world. These traces mustn’t interfere with a reading of the book. We decided to reproduce pages from it that bear witness to its power.

In 2011, Mesmaeker’s artist’s book with the same title was published, with reproductions of all the drawings, completed with new black and white, as well as colour sketches (three photocopied pages) and a photograph of the entrance to a camp of the military police in Brussels. Page 52 of *A Childhood*—selected by the artist to illustrate this article—bears witness to Mesmaeker’s playful jest that surfaces time and time again in her comments on her own work, but also in the way she has distanced herself since 1975 in her work from all intellectual or artistic propriety. In this context, the reference to Francesca Allinson’s two heroines who play truant and who ‘have seen without being seen,’ makes us think of one of the artist’s favourite dictums: ‘You haven’t seen what I’ve seen.’

As her contempt for adults deepened, so she grew more rebellious and insisted that we should take our lives independent of school. This meant that while evading as many classes as we could, we should try to resolve the chief problems of humanity. It was not difficult for us to disappear, for during the shuffled transits from one classroom to another we were able to go away, to hide whispering in a cloakroom, to play at reading in the library, and once on an occasion of supreme daring (most of it Thea’s contribution), to get onto the roof. We climbed up and down the slate roof in an ecstasy of naughtiness, peeped in at the windows where lessons were going on, saw without being seen. And then, weary of sooty climbing, we leaned over the parapet that overlooked the street and had come to discuss religion so earnestly that we forgot the time. When we were caught, our offence was

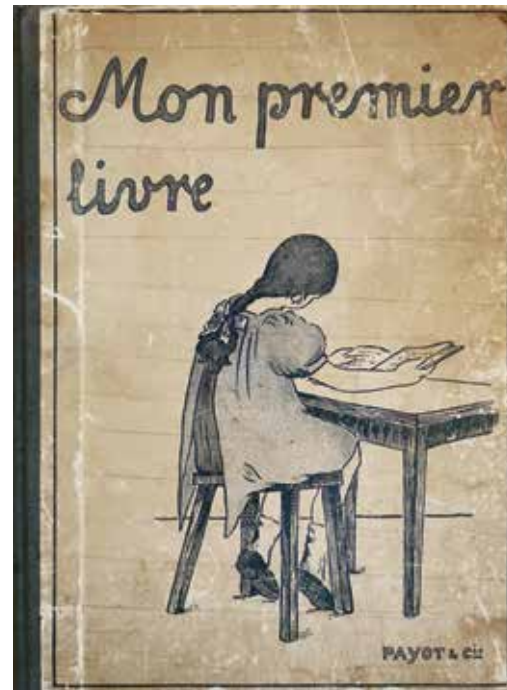
considered grave enough to deserve an interview with the headmistress, to whom we were duly sent; Thea unabashed, I quaking.

We were addressed as though we had been undermining the foundations of society, and at the end of a long lecture were asked: ‘What did you do while you presumed to absent yourselves in that part of the buildings which you have no business ever to visit?’

‘We played around,’ said I miserably.

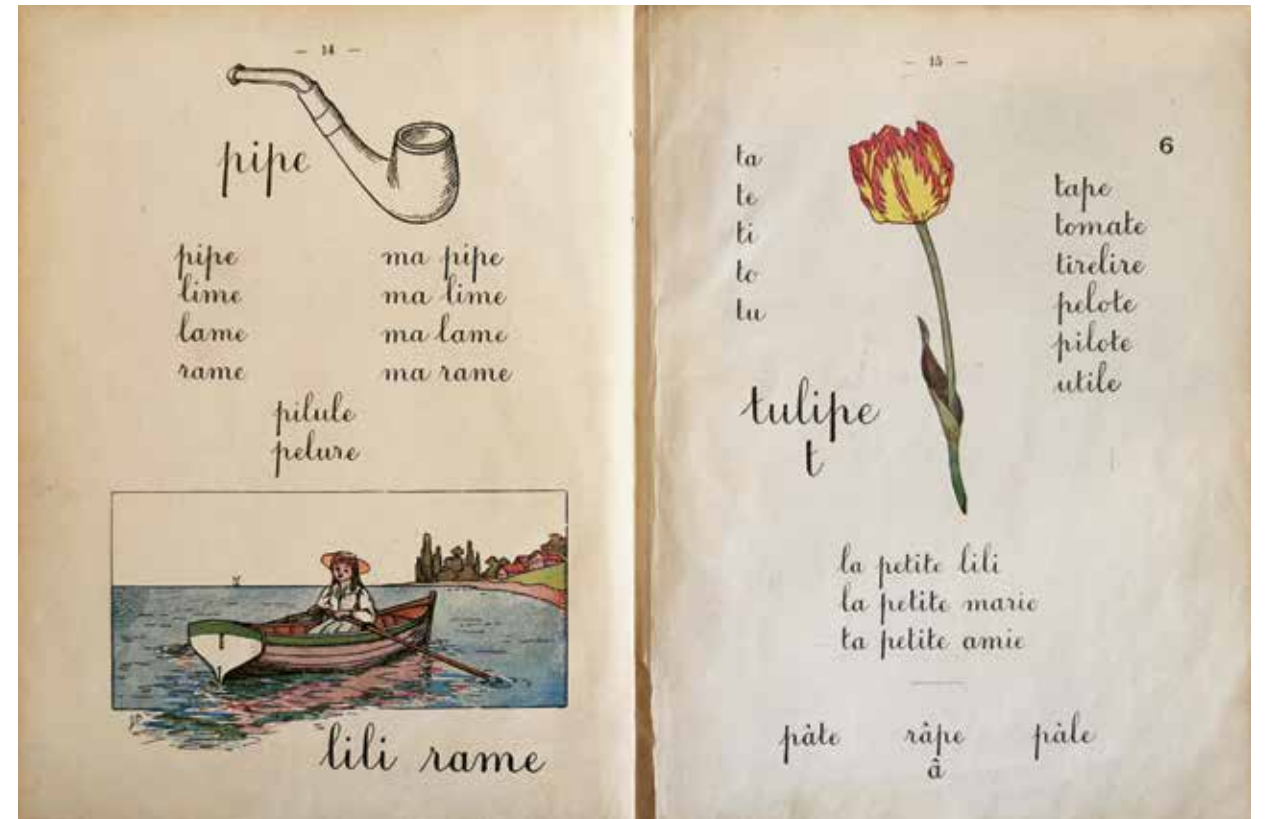
‘And talked about religion,’ added Thea stoutly [...]

— Francesca Allinson, *A Childhood*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1937.

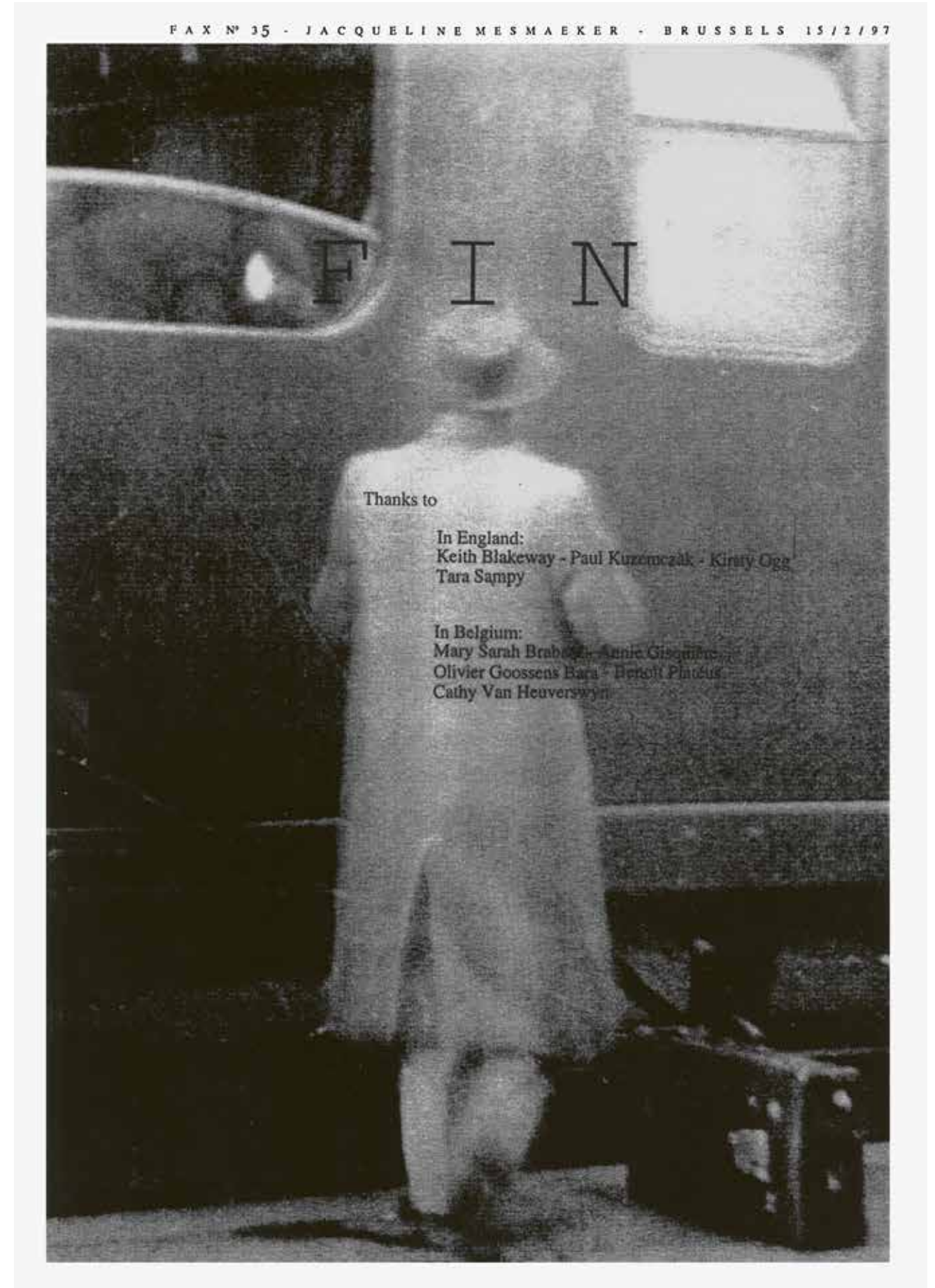
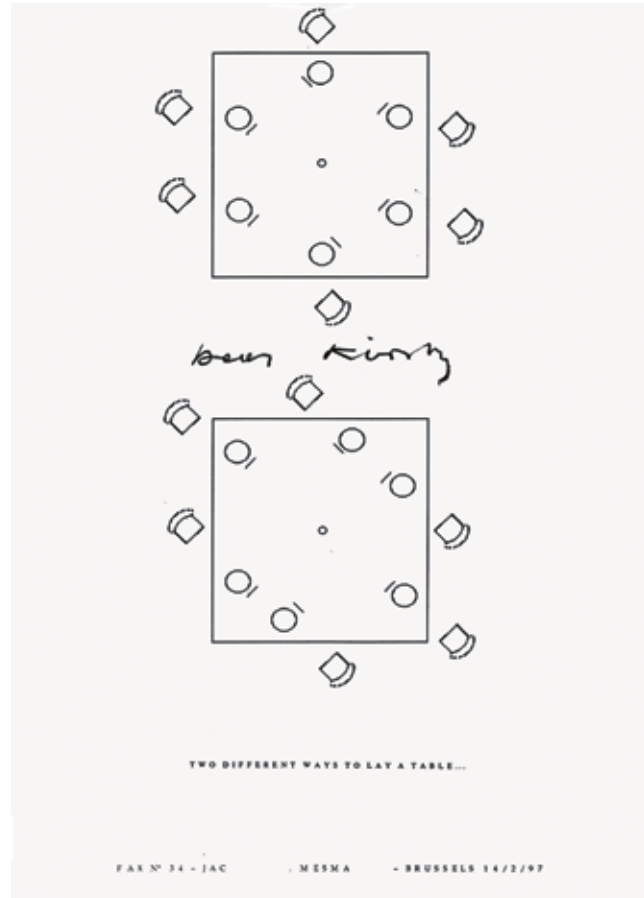
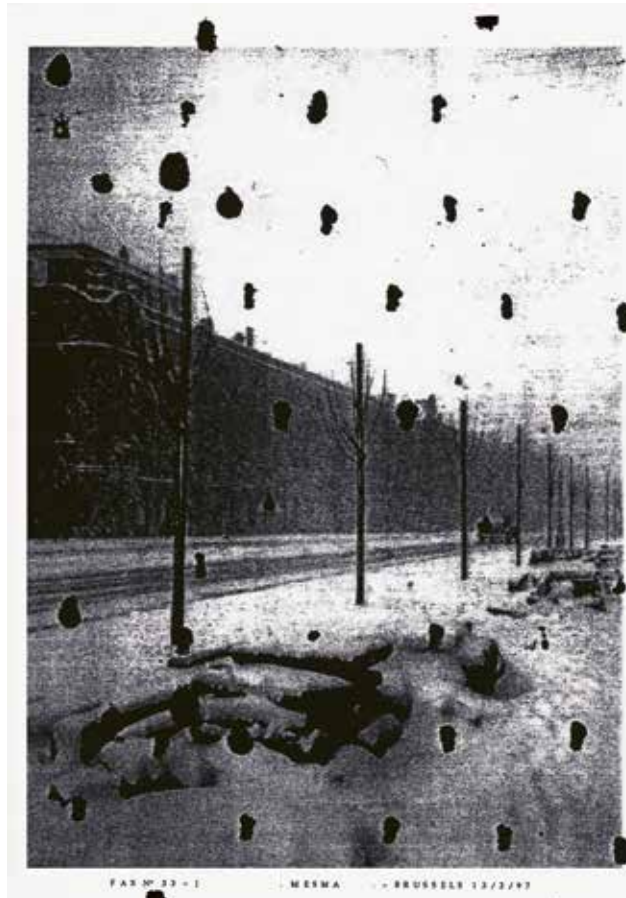
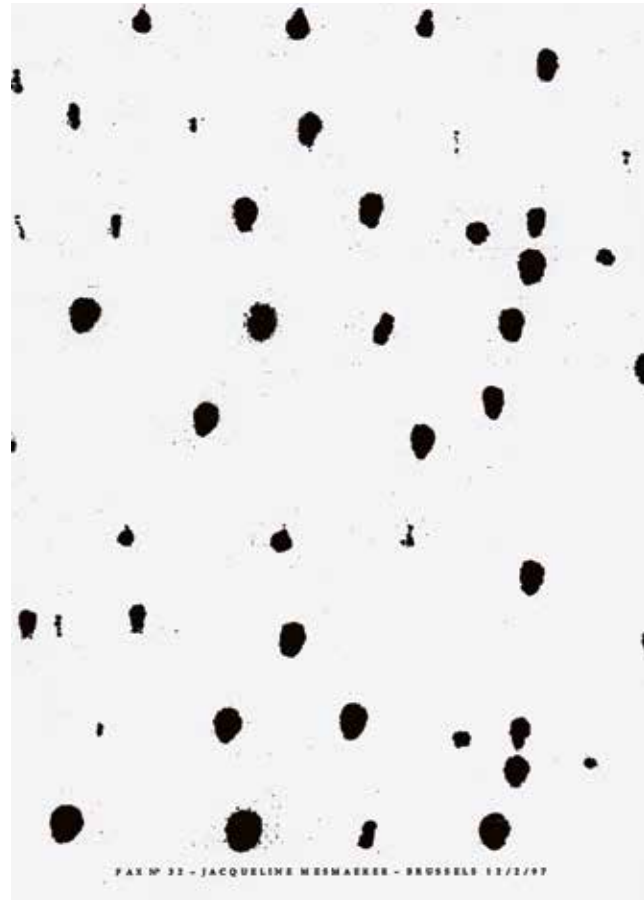


Mon Premier Livre, Payot & Cie, 1933

This practice of introducing pictorial or graphic interventions that refer to striking passages from the books she has read will continue in other books she creates and results in the video *Secret Outlines* (1996), in which she explores and emphasises the gaze of the visitor/reader in the diversity of every page.



Mon Premier Livre, Payot & Cie, 1933



contempt for adults deepened, so she grew more rebellious and insisted that we should make our lives independent of school. This meant that while evading as many classes as we could, we should try to settle the chief problems of humanity. It was not difficult for us to disappear, for during the shuffled transits from one classroom to another we were able to get away, to hide whispering in a cloakroom, to play at reading in the library, and once on an occasion of supreme daring (most of it Thea's contribution), to get on to the roof. We climbed up and down the slate slopes in an ecstasy of naughtiness, peeped in at the windows where lessons were going on, saw without being seen. And then, weary of sooty climbing, we leaned over the parapet that overlooked the street and had come to discuss religion so earnestly that we forgot the time. When we were caught, our offence was considered grave enough to deserve an interview with the headmistress, to whom we were duly sent; Thea unabashed, I quaking.

We were addressed as though we had been undermining the foundations of society, and at the end of a long lecture were asked: "What did you do while you presumed to absent yourselves in that part of the buildings which you have no business ever to visit?"

"We played around," said I, miserably.

"And talked about religion," added Thea stoutly.

"Indeed? I should like to hear more of your

DES LETTRES, DES REGARDS, DES IMAGES

A PROPOS DE
QUELQUES LECTURES,
PARMI D'AUTRES, DE
JACQUELINE MESMAEKER

(RÉCIT)

MICHEL BAUDSON



I. « IT FITTED »

A l'occasion d'une de nos conversations impromptues peu avant l'ouverture de l'exposition de son exposition organisée par Museumcultuur Strombeek/Gent, Jacqueline, avec une insistance marquée par l'urgence de dire sans tarder, insista, quasi à brûle pourpoint, sur l'importance de son tout *premier livre*, qu'elle avait reçu dès le premier jour de son arrivée à l'âge de 5 ans dans cette petite école de montagne, en Suisse, isolée en pleine campagne, petit village d'horloger, où, pour des raisons de santé, son père l'avait conduite pour sa première année de scolarité.

Initiation à la lecture, éveil au sens des images, découvertes des listes et des colonnes de mots, attention à la distinction orale des sons par la visualisation des voyelles et des consonnes, ce livre reçu des mains de sa maîtresse d'école, qui l'avait préalablement frictionnée à l'alcool camphré dans sa chambre pour atténuer le choc et la fatigue du voyage, où elle dormait sous un duvet rouge, représente encore pour elle aujourd'hui un cadeau merveilleux qui, pendant cette première année de scolarité en pleine nature, détermina son ouverture d'esprit, sa curiosité, sa soif de découvertes et de lecture. Ce livre ne l'a depuis lors jamais quittée et reste encore aujourd'hui en bonne place dans son appartement-atelier-bibliothèque où elle garde précieusement les souvenirs, objets divers,

BRIEVEN, BLIKKEN, BEELDEN

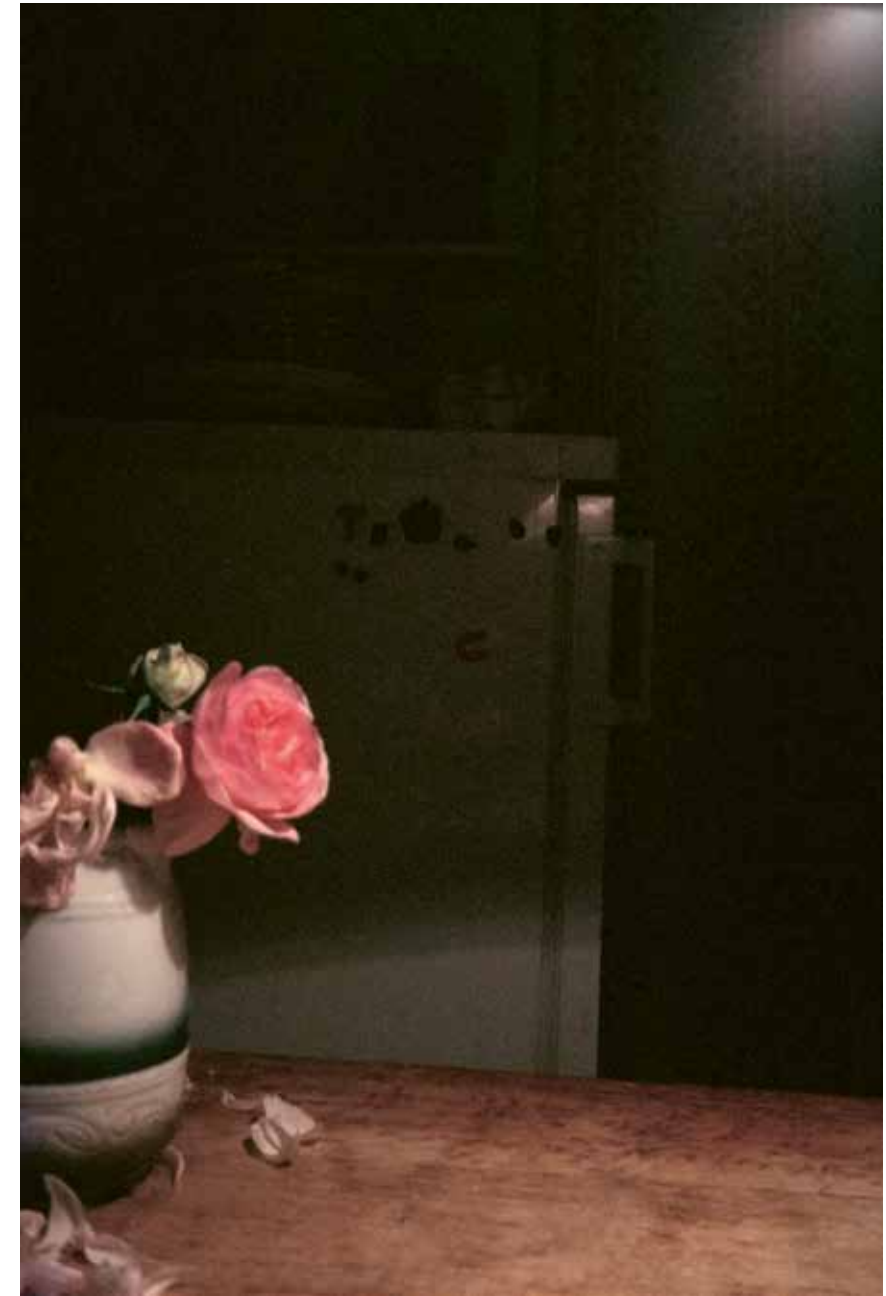
OVER, ONDER ANDERE,
ENIGE LECTUUR
VAN JACQUELINE
MESMAEKER

(EEN RELAAS)

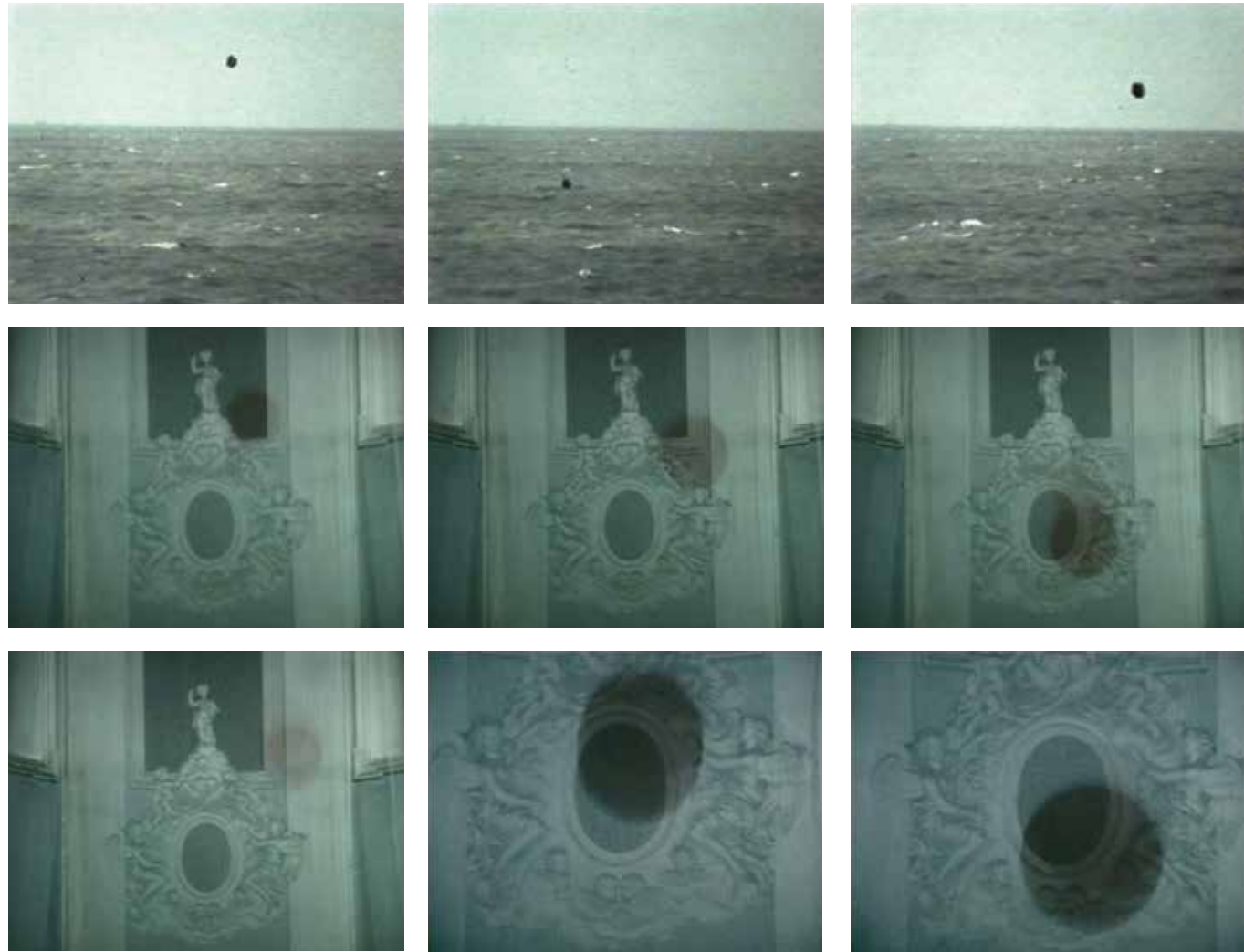
I. 'IT FITTED'

Bij een van onze onverwachte gesprekken kort voor de opening van haar tentoonstelling in het Cc Strombeek, beklemtoonde Jacqueline Mesmaeker, met weinig omhaal en met een nadrukkelijkheid die ingegeven leek door de noodzaak om meteen ter zake te komen, hoe belangrijk haar *premier livre* voor haar was geweest. Het ging om een boekje dat ze als vijfjarige kreeg op haar eerste schooldag in de kleine school in het geïsoleerde uurwerkmakersdorp in de Zwitserse bergen, waar haar vader haar naartoe had gestuurd om gezondheidsredenen.

Toen ze aankwam in de school had haar toekomstige juf haar naar haar kamertje gebracht waar ze zou slapen onder een rood donzen dekbed. Daar had de juf haar eerst ingewreven met kamferspiritus om de schok en de vermoeidheid van de reis te verzachten en dan het boek overhandigd. Aan de hand van dit boek zou ze leren lezen. Het wekte haar belangstelling voor de betekenis van beelden. Ze ontdekte lijsten en kolommen met woorden. En het boek besteedde aandacht aan klankverschillen door klinkers en medeklinkers te visualiseren. Ook vandaag nog vertegenwoordigt dat boek voor haar een wonderlijk cadeau. Dit boek zou tijdens dat eerste schooljaar temidden van de natuur haar geest openen en haar nieuwsgierigheid en dorst naar ontdekkingen en lezen wekken. Het boek



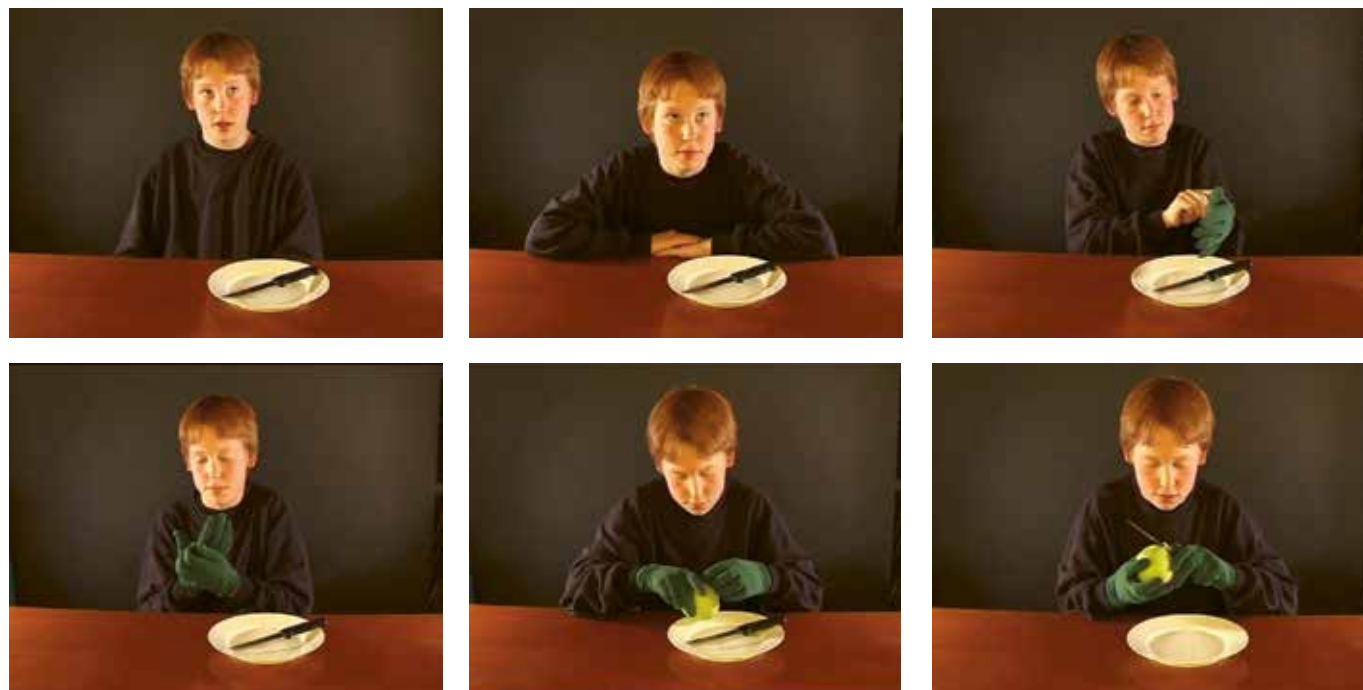
Details of: *Séquence*, 1978–2020



Last Shot, 2006–2011. Video stills



La Pelouse, 1998–2011. Video stills



Naïse, 2002. Video stills



Matthis, 2002. Video stills



Jacqueline Mesmaeker supervising the installation of *Enkel Zicht Naar Zee, Naar West*, at the exhibition *Aktuele Kunst in België: Inzicht/Overzicht – Overzicht/Inzicht*, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent, 1979

Sunday 19 July. I had an appointment with my dear friend Luk Lambrecht to see your exhibition in Bozar. The visit took us all day. Slowly, respectfully, Luk and I walked about the exhibition. *Lire et écrire*. 'Tomorrow I will decide to fight and to wear a suit of armour on stage.' Recently, I went for a hike in the French Alps in Savoy. Nine days of walking. My feet assuming the task of inventing a path, my head a storage room for all the sensations I went through. I didn't seem to need the part between feet and head at all. Visiting your exhibition made me think of my hike in the mountains. The landscape you unveil in your work is a landscape removed from time and place, yet embracing a universality, or rather, universalities. You stitch together sensations that bear the imprint of the history of art, which is like a reality you live in your everyday life—an everyday life marked by a sensitivity to language, images, words, forms, ideas... As if you were a member of a resistance movement, rejecting or distancing yourself from the world of art, the unique object, a world obsessed by the certitude of reason. Anyway, I didn't just write to share some humble thoughts with you. 'J'ai rencontré un quasi-rien. – I've met a near-nothing.' I read that at the entrance of your exhibition. It's a phrase that touches me, like the *17 Doutes* touch me. Being able to doubt is a grace; avoiding doubt is a mistake. But it wasn't doubt that led me to purchase *Enkel Zicht Naar Zee, Naar West* (*Single View, towards the Sea, towards the West*) (1978), but the certainty that such a work should be part of a public collection—notably the collection of the S.M.A.K. in Ghent. Besides, it was also in the museum in Ghent that the work was on view on the occasion of Jan Hoet's exhibition *Contemporary Art in Belgium: Insight/Overview – Overview/Insight*. Anyway, it's not the past that interests me, but the future, which takes us to unknown paths. And it's thanks to the efforts of Luk Lambrecht and Lieze Eneman, and other people who helped to organise your exhibition in the Cultural Centre Strombeek, that after thirty-five years the work was given a new lease of life and could herald its future. And it was here that I, and many others, were able to discover this masterpiece. Indeed, I hope that you allow me to use a word as timeless as this one: *masterpiece*. Today, in our time, another world is being built, a world that is removed from certain ways and tools of the past. But the use of these ways and tools is still justified, if we relate them to new contents and new points of view. *Enkel Zicht Naar Zee, Naar West* made me think of Sylvain Tesson's book *Dans les forêts de Sibérie*, an autobiographical story of the author's stay in Siberia. Especially this phrase came to my mind: 'If nature thinks, the landscape is an expression of its ideas.' I'm quite certain that you share with me the same curiosity about this particular sentence, especially with regard to the idea that nature thinks. When I saw *Enkel Zicht Naar Zee, Naar West*, the feelings that overwhelmed me made me think of this sentence, because it's like a fluid and ethereal remnant of a moment experienced, here and elsewhere, yesterday and tomorrow. The installation is like an invitation to lose oneself in a continuity, in the suggestion of a landscape, in a link with the distant and immeasurable. It's a visual reflection that through the superimposed layers of tulle evokes the concept of a layered painting, but in this instance created with the medium of film, in which time and space meet synchronically, and where the viewer is immersed between direct experience and the time lag of memory. The title of the work refers to a direction, while the images projected refer to a multiplicity. The direction (perspective) is like a trap from the past; the sequence of images is an invitation to look at the world, to cast a glance that is not only ours. You whisper in Caspar David Friedrich's ear, but he doesn't seem to be answering.

Philippe Van Cauteren, Ostend
14 January 2021

(This letter is an adaption from a letter I sent to
Jacqueline Mesmaeker on 28 August 2020.)