

MIMÉTISME



# Mimétisme

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# Introduction

*Mimétisme* is a group exhibition probing an alternative conceptual framework for ‘theatricality’ in the visual arts. Rather than looking at formal exchanges between theatre and the arts, this exhibition brings together works that use and critically reflect the abilities to act and to become something else. In doing so, it leaves behind the dominant understanding of mimesis as realist pictorial representation in favour of what Walter Benjamin has referred to as the ‘mimetic faculty’: the mind’s ability to detect and appropriate similarities, to mirror others, to imitate, to immerse and to become.

*Mimétisme* contributes to an alternative history around the prevailing modernist narrative of overcoming the mimetic paradigm. In this history, referring to Surrealism, theatre and film history, the mimetic faculty is used to explore the way we inhabit and perform imaginaries, and embody images and norms. *Mimétisme* thus aims at shedding new light on the performative strategies that have historically used acting and mimetic behaviour in order to critique, undermine and transform representations and societal regimes of identity from within, to counter the imposed mimesis of oppressive identification by using strategies of masking, camouflage and mimicry. In *Mimétisme*, these strategies are brought

into a constellation that looks at the acting body and mind as a medium, and explores the possibilities and pathologies of mediality.

Along the historical trajectories of Brechtian performance and feminism, *Mimétisme* moves from exploring societal forms of behavioural copying, empathy and becoming similar (as in immersion into milieus and cultural assimilation) to forms of excessive mimesis, sketching out different possibilities to address power relations, and to portray, once again, the relation between individual and environment, self and world, thing and context or figure and ground.

The present short guide is composed of short texts on the artists participating and their works. It concludes with a text naming the most important references for the theoretical framework of the project, which is also an introduction into the library section of the exhibition, titled the Mimetic Cabinet, on the basis of which a more extensive publication is being prepared and will be published in 2008.

– Anselm Franke

# Participating artists



# Paweł Althamer and Artur Zmijewski

*So genannte Wellen und andere Phänomene des Geistes (So-Called Waves and Other Phenomena of the Mind, 2003–2004, 8 DVDs)* is Paweł Althamer and Artur Zmijewski's first large-scale collaboration, despite having long been connected by friendship, through studying together and sharing a wide range of interests. Yet their interest in behaviour, mental processes and the human psyche usually leads them to different results: Althamer operates from an overtly mystic perspective and Zmijewski from a more rationalist point of view. *So-Called Waves and Other Phenomena of the Mind* was developed over several years, with a first version premiering in Düsseldorf in 2003. The complete work, consisting of eight videos, is now in the permanent collection of the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, where it also was part of the exhibition *Paweł & Vincent* in 2005. These videos, shot by Zmijewski, follow Althamer on eight 'journeys' under the influence of psychoactive substances or induced altered states. These include LSD, mushrooms, peyote, hashish, as well as hypnosis and a truth serum. In doing so, Althamer follows the path of earlier avantgarde artists such as Vito Acconci and Marina Abramović, but also of historical figures like Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, an artist active in Warsaw in the 1920s who experimented with psychoactive substances and documented the results.

The eight videos of *So-Called Waves and Other Phenomena of the Mind* are conceived by both artists as sculptural works, and this may also be a hint given by them towards the possibility of comparing the different altered states in spatial terms, through the relation between an individual and his or her immediate and social and natural environment. Indeed, one of the most impressive aspects of the work (which otherwise oscillates between fascinating

visions and observations, theatrical revelations of transcendence, the obscure and the banal) is Althamer's transformed interaction with the surrounding space and the psychoactive substance's effect of disturbing the otherwise stable relation between self and the world, subject and object. As these boundaries dissolve, Althamer engages in various forms of theatrical mimesis and mimicry – a 'becoming-similar' to the environment and a play of mutual recognition, which appear identical with his increased perception of his environment.

# Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett's (1906, Dublin, Ireland – 1989, Paris, France) famous venture into the territory of film, written in 1963 and filmed in New York in the summer of 1964, directed by Alan Schneider and featuring Buster Keaton, appears to be a film in which a protagonist is looking for an escape, an escape from being, as being-in-the-picture. *Film* (1965, 21 min, DVD), which has no dialogue, takes its basis in Berkeley's theory '*Esse est percipi*', that is, 'To be is to be perceived'. Buster Keaton performs as an old man in a tenement apartment, mutilating keepsake photographs and dodging the eyes of his puppy, kitten, parakeet and lone goldfish, everything that resembles an eye, including the ornate design at the top of the back of his single piece of furniture, a rocking chair. Also his own gaze is unbearable to him, and he covers the wall mirror with a drape. *Film* depicts a somewhat desperate, dramatic attempt at dissolution of the self, an attempt to escape from visibility, from the power of recognition by a gaze. Beckett himself explained, 'He is in search of non-being, in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in the inescapability of self-perception.' A few times throughout the film, the camera shows Buster checking his own pulse, as though which side of life he is on were a continual question; at the same time, his nervousness suggests his fear of death, even as he is inviting and preparing for it. Upon the final (deadly?) confrontation with the camera, it becomes clear that only non-being can secure the end of our being determined by others, by the internalised gaze of alterity, that draw us into visibility, into 'the picture.'

# Elisabetta Benassi

*Lapsus* (2005, mixed material), by the Italian artist Elisabetta Benassi (1966, Rome, Italy), is a sound installation that portrays a specific case of mimetic behaviour – the only piece in the exhibition that is not primarily visual but sonic. Mimetic behaviour here occurs as an adaptation to the environment by appropriating some of its features: what we hear is the song of an Indian blackbird that has been living for some time inside a car-wrecker and has learned to imitate a great variety of the surrounding mechanical sounds.

Benassi has been occupied for a while now with cars as cultural objects and the place they occupy in our collective imaginaries. *Lapsus* touches upon this theme through the location of its source and the materials used – speakers and a car radio – which, in the way they are mounted on the wall, vaguely suggest the features of a human face. Here we have another mimetic process, this time on the part of the spectator: anthropomorphism, which projects human features onto the surroundings and turns everything into a potential mirror. Benassi thus opens a field of possible references, where the bird's mimetic behaviour is connected with a particular form of mimesis related to art: the spectator's desire to find a mirror in the work of art.

# Charif Benhelima

Charif Benhelima (1967, Belgium) is an Antwerp-based photographer. For his project *Welcome to Belgium* he spent years creating a photographic portrait of migrants in Belgium and life in 'illegality'. The project is connected to Charif Benhelima's personal background, and the process of the project reflects this personal involvement. The individual pictures in this unsettling series of works, published in a similarly titled book, are with few exceptions in black and white, and express much of the paradoxical tension between the migrant condition and the immobilisation experienced by the people he portrays, who show a peculiar nervousness in relation to the camera. The exhibition *Mimétisme* presents the third section, *San Damiano* (7 photographs, 80 × 120 cm) of the complete work, shot in San Damiano in Brussels, a refuge for 'illegal' migrants offering shelter, food and medical help, which had to close due to financial problems, as it received no government funds. Produced during a year in which Charif Benhelima lived in San Damiano, the pictures depict a situation of complete immobilisation in which psychological and spatial dimensions converge.

These pictures can also be seen as depicting a certain 'bottom line' of mimicry, dissolving the boundaries between self and space in political terms. The people depicted in the series seem to dissolve into the background of the space, wrapped up and hiding, caught in a liminal condition between being and not-being. The 'oneness' with space here is simultaneously a foreclosing of any identity, a forced 'de-personalisation through assimilation to space', the pathological condition of mimicry that Roger Caillois described in his article 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' in 1935, being pressed into space, into invisibility, strictly corresponding with the

status of invisibility these people have in society and before the law. A certain kind of mimicry enters here into a clinical condition of facelessness, where it is the forced and only possible reaction to a system of identification and visibility (the migratory regime of the state).

# Pierre Bismuth

*One Man Show* (2003, 6:24 min, 2 DVDs) by Pierre Bismuth (1963, France) is based upon Buster Keaton's movie *The Playhouse* (1921). The piece is an act of doubling, and as such, refers to and repeats Buster Keaton's slapstick acting method, and its mechanistic response to the surroundings. In *The Playhouse*, the action is centred on the idea of symmetry. Bismuth translates this literally, and splits the image onto two screens, a mirrored image of the right-hand-side of the screen and a mirrored image of the left-hand-side. Each screen is thus bisected vertically, with the result being reminiscent of the optical effect of the kaleidoscope. In this way Bismuth underscores several themes dealt with by Keaton himself: symmetry, mirroring, multiplicity and duplication.

# Lieven de Boeck

Lieven de Boeck (1972, Belgium) works with what could also be called a ‘mimesis reversed’. His interest and expertise lie in space and architecture. ‘Mimesis reversed’ would signify a technique by which the place of the subject in any given context is consciously left unoccupied, portraying this position merely from the multiple ways in which we have already been anticipated and ‘framed’. It is this sense of uncovering the ‘being authored’ by the conditions of the environment and milieu that counts for the gesture of reversal – the other side of the individual subject, its mediated alterity. Lieven de Boeck’s works, like *House #1. Self Portrait*, a collection of the material things he keeps in his studio, and his other investigations into housing and architecture follow a similar path. Architecture, and the house especially, functions in his work as a second skin, the embodiment of norms and the collective unconscious. Moreover, they appear as an instance of the social mask – and related to that, the habits of inhabitation appear as a form of camouflage, governing the boundary between private and public, the self and the world.

In *Mimétisme*, Lieven de Boeck presents two works, both of them expanding upon the specific poetics he has begun to articulate and dealing with a wider notion of the self-portrait. The first is an existing work, a slide projection titled *WE* (2007, slide projection, sound), in which drawings depicting the outlines of people are shown, made after images from fashion magazines. This piece is accompanied by a soundtrack with a spoken version of personal e-mail conversations. A new work, commissioned by Extra City, will consist of letters sent to Extra City during the running time of the exhibition and addressed by Lieven de Boeck to himself. These letters are based on the published letters of classic writers and poets.

# Claude Cahun

Claude Cahun (1894, Nantes, France – 1954, Saint-Hélier, Jersey, UK) lived in Jersey with her stepsister Marcel Moore, born Suzanne Malherbe, from 1937 until her death. During the Nazi Occupation they were actively involved in the Resistance. Eventually they were imprisoned and sentenced to death, in 1944, but the sentences were never carried out. However, Cahun's health never recovered from her treatment in jail, and she died in 1954.

Claude Cahun's photographs count as one of the earliest and most impressive artistic endeavours dealing with the relation between self and alterity, gender and sexuality in the medium of photography. Today, Cahun is recognized as one of the leading artists of the Surrealist movement, influencing the male-dominated Parisian circle with their fetishisation of the female, role models that she powerfully countered by developing an aesthetics of transgender performance and a chameleonic relation to the self and sexuality, fuelled by role-play and gestures of reversal. Her adoption of a sexually ambiguous name, together with her poetry and photographs, has contributed to her revolutionary impact on the perception of gender and the boundaries of the normative.

Her photographs, writings, and general life as an artistic and political revolutionary continue to influence countless artists, namely Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin. For a long time, her photographic works were invisible. In the 1980s, the French philosopher François Leperlier rediscovered locally held collections, based on the estate of Suzanne Malherbe in Jersey. The collections were later purchased by the Jersey Heritage Trust and became available to the public.

# Mircea Cantor

*The Landscape Is Changing* (2003, 22 min, DVD) by the Romanian artist Mircea Cantor (1977, Cluj) shows demonstrators marching in silence through the busy streets of Tirana, the capital of Albania, brandishing blank mirrors in the place of slogans. The demonstration is reminiscent of the regular marches in the Communist era – and the use of Robert Smithson’s mirror displacement is yet another of the artist’s frequent use of art historical references, which he often situates in contemporary political contexts.

# Andrea Cooper

The video *Strange Things* (2006, 15:30 min, DVD) by Andrea Cooper (New Brunswick, Canada) evokes a number of references. She uses acting and first-person narrative in a theatrical, poetic performance in front of the camera in a simulated cave/landscape setting; the fictional character inhabiting this landscape is played by herself. The character appears as a version of a femme fatale, which, along with the figure of the ‘praying mantis’, was the preferred surrealist motif for the ‘dark side’ of femininity – and a well-known cinematic and literary trope. This trope, inevitably linked to seduction, and to mimicry as a female masquerade, symbolised the fear of castration and of being ‘cannibalised’ (fed by the myth that the female praying mantis eats the male after copulation). However, Andrea Cooper’s version of the femme fatale not only evokes this ‘dark side’ but yet another image well-known to historical feminist critique: the relation of the female body to landscapes and the earth. Referring to the writings of Sherrill Grace and Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things* probes our ability to create and become immersed in ‘a world’ – a world that is, in this case, Canada and the poetic myth of ‘the North’. ‘The idea of Canada and the idea of North are one and the same.’ Amidst a cold, bleak white landscape, Mina, the character played by the artist, descends into loneliness and madness, believing that the souls of men who have died in the Arctic are haunting her. *Strange Things* premiered at the International Film Festival in Berlin in 2007.

# Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska

All creative work is born into copyright; every image, text or sound is automatically designated as the property of its apparent author. Copyright is founded on the right of exclusion – what is contractually mine cannot be yours. Through this exclusion, copyright removes creative works from the public domain, denying the legal possibility of their creative re-use by others.

(Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska)

For some time now, Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings have referred in their practice to a quote attributed to Douglas Hueber from the 1960s, suggesting that enough art had been produced to date. Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings instead focused their projects on creatively re-imagining existing images, objects, collections and archives. Rather than being iconoclasts or refusing to make images as such, Cummings and Lewandowska have turned to analysing existing images and representations in the context of their respective economies.

*Screen Tests* (2005–2006, 32 min, DVD, a collaboration with Ben White and Eileen Simpson) refers to Andy Warhol's project of the same name from 1964 and is a work based entirely upon out-of-copyright film material taken from public archives in the UK, presented under the most generous Creative Commons license: an extension to existing international copyright laws, the material presented in *Screen Tests* is open to all further use and copying under the Creative Commons license. The recorded material of the auditions was made at The Manchester School of Art.

# Dias & Riedweg

With their recent presentation at *Documenta 12* in Kassel, Mauricio Dias (1964, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil) & Walter Riedweg (1955, Luzern, Switzerland) have referred to the Brazilian modernist tradition of ‘anthropophagia’, and connected this artistic movement and its conception of Brazilian culture with the spectacularisation and myths created by European colonists and explorers around cannibalistic practices in South America (*Funk Staden*, 2007). ‘Anthropophagia’ was revitalised as a concept by the modernist movement in Brazil under the lead of Oswald Andrade, referring to the Brazilian tradition of incorporating otherness, a ‘cannibalistic’ attitude to alterity. This tradition has powerful repercussions in Brazilian art and popular culture to this day. Cannibalism, whether as a practice or metaphor, has also come to serve as a powerful juxtaposition to ‘theatrical mimesis’, to mimicry as a dissolution in space – the movement here being the opposite, not assimilation in space, but incorporation in a movement of creating self-sameness and simultaneously expanding the self. With their new work, Dias & Riedweg re-visit the question of difference and identity once again, this time through the medium of the self-portrait.

*A Casa (The House, 2007, 3 min, 5 DVDs)* consists of five videos shown on TV monitors and set up over a cut-out vinyl drawing on the wall. Dias & Riedweg decided to multiply their own images in each of these five videos in such a way that a multiplicity of ‘Mauricios’ and various ‘Walters’ appear. The self is transformed into a sum of many ‘others’, and identity, especially in the realm of the house and daily routine, is lost in a labyrinth of mirrors, of self-images. The self-portrait here dissolves into its own otherness.

# Harun Farocki

In the summer of 1996, we filmed application training courses in which one learns how to apply for a job. School drop-outs, university graduates, people who have been re-trained, the long-term unemployed, recovered drug addicts, and mid-level managers – all of them are supposed to learn how to market and sell themselves, a skill to which the term self-management is applied. The self is perhaps nothing more than a metaphysical hook from which to hang a social identity. It was Kafka who likened being accepted for a job to entering the Kingdom of Heaven; the path leading to both are completely uncertain. Today one speaks of getting a job with the greatest obsequiousness, but without any grand expectations.  
(Harun Farocki)

*Die Bewerbung (The Interview, 1997, 60 min, DVD)* by Harun Farocki (1944, Neutitschein, Czechoslovakia) is one of a series of films in which Farocki looks at Capitalism's requirements of self-fashioning and the image-logic of advertising and its underlying ideology. Immanent in *The Interview* is a specific model and ideological application of the magic of mimesis – in this case, the creation of a coherent and marketable self-image that is naturalised in the moment when, in the face of authority, it 'passes' as that which it represents; that is, the subject 'becoming' what it is supposed to represent. This imposed mimesis locates the subject in a permanent crisis of managing the paradox between a call for self-sameness transformed by the logic of marketing, and a flexible personality. Harun Farocki is best known for his essayistic films that are deeply involved in uncovering the rhetoric of the medium and its political implications.

# Marlon E. Fuentes

Upon investigating the filmmaker's own Filipino heritage, *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995, 57 min, DVD) by Marlon E. Fuentes (1954, Manila, Philippines) is situated simultaneously in colonial history and migrant memories, regimes of visibility, the desire for narrative authenticity and the role of media. Like many films that undertake similar journeys recapturing historical narratives, *Bontoc Eulogy* begins with the presentation of archival footage, with the filmmaker listening to a conserved piece of history brought back to life – the gramophone recordings of what we later surmise is the voice of Fuentes's grandfather Markod, an Igorot warrior from the mountains of northern Luzon. We are told that he was among the 1,100 Filipino tribal natives brought to the US to be a 'living exhibit' at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Parallel to the Fair's glorification of progress, it was the site of the world's largest-ever 'ethnological display rack', in which hundreds of so-called primitive and savage men and women from all over the globe were exhibited. The film follows the path of Markod, never to return home, and sets out for a journey to find his remains. Using historical data from the Library of Congress and the National Archives, 90-year-old archival footage and seamless recreations, Fuentes creates a reverse 'travel story', not from the point of view of the westerner, but of a man brought to the West as an exhibit. Fuentes complicates this story about colonialism, 'display' and death (the film ends in the Smithsonian Museum in front of a vitrine of skulls) by his suggestive blurring of truth and fiction (suggesting Markod is his grandfather), playing on viewing habits and the spectator's desire for authenticity.

*Bontoc Eulogy* represents a whole thematic field in the context of this exhibition. These works are not only concerned with colonialism and the peculiar role of the spectacle, the power

of the gaze and 'mimetic machines' (such as the gramophone, the camera etc.) but are also occupied with the (performative) re-appropriation of history and the search for lost continuity in personal and collective memories, recently often associated with so-called strategies of re-enactment. Also in this thematic field are numerous works that question the role of fiction and power in the construction of historical narratives.

## Ted Gaier and Peter Ott

The film project *Hölle Hamburg* (*Hell Hamburg*, 2006, 93 min, DVD) by Peter Ott (1966, Hamburg, Germany) and Ted Gaier (1964, Stuttgart, Germany) is about a ship that is abandoned in Hamburg's harbour by its owners; about the crew, who then find themselves in a desperate situation, and a female journalist whose talents are barely recognised by the film company she works for, but all the more so by an agent of the secret services. Within the crew, there is a small group who are members of a mysterious and secretive seafarer's cult that represents the residuum of the marine section of the Comintern. Several cells of this organisation survived the Comintern's disintegration in 1942 and have transformed its secret codes as well as the Communist agitprop using an obsessive trance technique: through a medium, they communicate with the dead souls of the Comintern functionaries and, guided by them, they take control of the ship.

The journalist is actually busy shooting a documentary film about the regulations and logistics of running a modern-day port and harbour. However, when her work brings her into contact with the abandoned ship, she becomes contaminated by the ghosts of the seamen and assumes a role in their cult of trance and possession. And so she sways between her everyday life, working on her film doing interviews at the harbour and bashing heads with her producer, and a strange, dreamlike and wild world in which everything that appears to be normal is presented from another side.

A secret service agent quickly recognises that only this journalist can lead him to the mysterious seafarers' network, whose existence poses a potential security breach in the world of international shipping. At first, he cunningly tries to seduce the journalist

with a promise of illustrious contacts as a means of furthering her career but as he comes up against a wall, he turns to other methods and the situation escalates dramatically.

# Tom Holert

The work *Stumbling Block. The Spectacle of Aptitude* (2006, 5 min, DVD) by Tom Holert (1962, Hamburg, Germany), a cultural theorist and journalist living in Berlin and teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, is a short visual lecture in the form of a video. It organises archival (audio and photographic) material and a historical-theoretical montage of citations and original text to narrate the historical emergence of aptitude and personality tests and their popularisation by American mass media during and after World War II. The history of psychological testing harks back to the psychological laboratories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to psychological assessments of military personnel in World War I, to labour psychology, scientific management and psychotechnics. *Stumbling Block*, however, focuses on the representation of aptitude and intelligence tests in American radio shows and illustrated magazines such as *Life* in the second half of the 1940s. The work considers the internalisation of individualized panoptic power and its technologies of assessment, the dialectical mobilisation and mediatisation of the individual, and the intangible tactics of reluctance and resilience entailed by the very technologies of subjection.

The theatre of examination starts early, and in practice never ends. The life of the individual in industrial and post-industrial societies is a relentless series of tests. The role of the examiner and candidate may be exchanged, but one thing is certain: both will always appear on stage together in the theatre of the examination. How is it possible to exercise creativity under the examiner's beady eye? What value does the product of the tested gesture have—scientific, aesthetic, economic? A child's hand lifts a wooden block and moves

it through the air of subordination and fear of failure. Where the block lands, a pattern is supposed to emerge appearing correct to the institutional gaze and the apparatuses of the examiner. In the wrong place the block becomes the stumbling block of someone's life.  
(Tom Holert)

# Sofia Hultén

Sofia Hultén's (1972, Sweden) practice consists of performances and actions documented on video. In these, she shows a profound concern with objects, and the way we relate to things. One of the themes of her work is the transition of various quotidian objects to trash, and the profound change they undergo in the various contexts, perhaps referring to what the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has called the 'social life of things'. Her works always depict this process itself, inhabiting the strange 'in-between' moments, where objects are neither-nor, neither in use nor in the trash-can, neither totally distinct from the environment or context, nor fully indistinguishable. In *Getting Rid of Stuff* (2001), for example, Sofia Hultén discards the numerous things that have accumulated in a Berlin gallery over the years, hiding, dumping or fitting them in at various places in the urban landscape, just before the gallery finally closed its doors. These techniques of dealing with objects have a 'reverse-effect', shedding light not merely on our relation to things and the influence they may or may not exert over us, but also on the relation and possible interdependence of subject and object. It is this border zone of transition that is also at stake in the work *Grey Area* (2001, 9 min, DVD). Here, Sofia Hultén documents her numerous attempts to conceal herself within the confines of an office environment. *Grey Area* is an attempt at disappearance through becoming one with the environment. The work is also reminiscent of a specific tradition of 'blending in' with interiors, of 'assimilation into space'. As opposed to the traditions of Surrealism and Op-Art, where these motifs have most persistently occurred, Sofia Hultén's performance of dissolving in space is more reminiscent of child's play, now deprived of excitement in a mere attempt at disappearance, situated in the context of daily routine.

# Yayoi Kusama and Jud Yalkut

Yayoi Kusama (1929, Nagano, Japan), avantgarde sculptor, painter and novelist, is one of the most important living contemporary Japanese artists. She moved to New York in 1957, where her work was pioneering in several respects. Her large-scale works, *Infinity Nets*, brought her widespread recognition. She exhibited large paintings, soft sculptures, and environmental sculptures using mirrors and electric lights, developing an artistic vocabulary that she has used ever since in always-surprising variations. In the late 1960s, she staged a number of happenings, such as body-painting festivals, fashion shows, and anti-war demonstrations. Since her return to Japan in 1973, she continues to live and work in Tokyo. She has also published several novels, including *The Hustlers*, *Grotto of Christopher Street*, and anthologies. In the 1980s, she held solo exhibitions in Calais, France, New York, USA, and Oxford, England; in 1993, she represented the Japanese pavilion in the 45th Venice Biennale.

*Kusama's Self-Obliteration* (1968, 23:24 min, DVD) filmed by Jud Yalkut, gives an idea of the energy and radicalism with which Yayoi Kusama provoked the New York art world of the late 1960s with her performances. The film documents the legendary 'nude happenings' of these years and has been shown at numerous international film festivals and awarded several prizes, among them the Fourth International Experimental Film Competition in Belgium.

While remaining outside traditional categories, Kusama's work relates to the fields of body art, feminist art, surrealism and psychedelia, often being pioneering, and has been acknowledged as of primary importance in art's relation to mental pathologies. For Kusama's work has also been understood for its therapeutic quality, turning around the pathological aspects of the disso-

lution of the boundary line between the self and the world, which is characteristic of psychosis and other mental disorders. This dimension of her work rises far beyond the mere personal, anticipating and enhancing, among others, the feminist tradition of a 'mimicry unleashed' (Luce Irigaray). With the psychotic condition being characterised by an implosion of the boundary line between self and world resulting in the subject being 'cannibalised' by the environment, the 'mimicry unleashed' by Kusama turns this power around, responding with an extension of the boundaries of the self into the infinity of the environment, in an act of excessive mimesis.

One day I was looking at the red flower patterns of the tablecloth on a table, and when I looked up I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the window and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt had begun to self-obliterate, to revolve in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space, and be reduced to nothingness. (Yayoi Kusama)

# Ria Pacquée

Antwerp-based artist Ria Pacquée (1954, Merksem, Belgium) has been known for her performances since the 70s. Her use of photography and video is derived from her performative practice – which in turn is closely connected to her wanderings, whether they be travels to faraway countries or walks in cities, and to her transformations into various characters which she has assumed over the years. *Madame* and *It* comprise a series of photographic tableaux, each consisting of six to ten photographs, made by an anonymous photographer in the period 1981 to 1995. The pictures show Pacquée in the roles of ‘Madame’ and ‘It’. Pacquée says of ‘Madame’: ‘I wanted to create a persona that could disappear into and become one of the masses and the way to achieve this was for the character to blend in with the everyday, average member of the public. In becoming this figure I made myself invisible and the world around me more visible.’ In the various parts of the series, we see ‘Madame’ posing at various social events – the carnival, a pilgrimage, etc. In the early 90s, Pacquée added the character ‘It’. ‘It’ is both ‘other’ and ‘same’, neither woman nor man, seemingly caught in the paradox of ‘blending in’, of camouflage into a social environment, and of utter detachment and loneliness. *Have you accepted that whatever seems to be is not, and that that which seems not to be is?* (1991) shows ‘It’ in London with a message board bearing the same slogan as the title of the work.

When you see ‘It’ standing with the placard, you think he belongs to a sect, but he doesn’t. His placard is a message without a message, a pseudo philosophical text, as so many things are pseudo.  
(Ria Pacquée).

*The Car* (1992, 6 photographs, 73 × 106 cm) shows 'It' as he/she drags a handcart full of waste wood through the city.

*Confronting a Colonial Past* (1993, 6 photographs, 73 × 106 cm) shows 'It' as a visitor in front of the displays of a market of African artefacts in Antwerp.

# Jean Painlevé

Jean Painlevé (1902–1989, Paris, France) was the son of Paul Painlevé, renowned mathematician and twice Prime Minister of France. Jean Painlevé showed a passion for nature at an early age and chose a career in the field of natural history. Today he is succeeded by nature documentarists such as Jacques Cousteau and David Attenborough. Painlevé always regarded his work as scientific, while its artistic originality stems from his surrealist leanings.

As a pioneer, Painlevé invented the first handheld steady cam and was one of the first to film underwater footage. Painlevé collaborated with Genevieve Hamon on almost two hundred films, abandoning filmmaking after Hamon's death. *Hyas et Sténorhynques, crustacés marins (Spider Crabs and Macropodia, Marine Crustaceans, 1929, 9:34 min, 16mm transferred to DVD)* documents crabs and worms in their surprising world. The film witnesses the never-before-seen camouflage of these disgruntled crustaceans and the strange ballet of the fan-twirling spirograph. *Les Amours de la Pieuvre (The Love Life of the Octopus, 1965, 13:29 min, DVD, music by Pierre Henry)* is one of Painlevé's most acclaimed works, shot almost 40 years after *Spider Crabs and Macropodia*. Both share not only remarkable insights into interaction with an environment, mimetic behaviour, camouflage and the expression of emotions, but also exhibit a second, cinematic and narrative form of 'mimétisme', that of Jean Painlevé himself, who, most clearly in his voiceovers, moves between description and enactment, between scientific registration and an imaginative 'becoming-similar' to the octopus.

Draped in her skin of changing colours, the amorous lady has closed her eyes... She has the heavy lids of a seductress, but the gaze within is always alert... Eight prehensile whips lash out, as if flung by the

most deft, most dexterous cowboy ... How can anything escape this repeated embrace? Each sucker, and there are hundreds of them, performs its function perfectly, even when the tentacle is severed. The octopus's moods are revealed in her changing hues: she may turn red, black, purple or yellow, depending on the area of pigment she contracts. Experiments have shown that she remembers things, recognizes things, and can adapt to society. She is offended by foul-smelling eggs and will throw them back at you violently, turning white with anger.\*

\*

Excerpt from *Science is Fiction. The Films of Jean Painlevé*, by Andy Masaki Bellows, Marina McDougal, Brigitte Berg, MIT Press, Cambridge MA / London, England, 2000.

# Jean Rouch

Jean Rouch (1917, Paris, France–2004, Konni, Niger) was a French filmmaker and anthropologist. He began his long association with African subjects in 1941 after working as a civil engineer supervising a construction project in Niger. However, shortly afterwards he returned to France to participate in the Resistance. He later returned to Africa, where he became an influential anthropologist and occasionally controversial filmmaker whose work has had a lasting impact on anthropology, postcolonial debates and filmmaking. Rouch held important positions in France, acting as Director of Research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique from 1966 to 1986, General Secretary at the Cinemathèque Française from 1985 to 1986 and President of the Cinemathèque from 1987 to 1991. Most of his work is considered *cinéma vérité* – a term used in reference to Dziga Vertov and his Kinopravda newsreels in the 20s, and his concept of the ‘camera eye.’ Another pronounced influence on Rouch was Surrealism, and his films also are often referred to as ethnographic or documentary surrealism – not only because of the way he reflects the traditional relation between observer and subject, continuously blurring the lines between fiction and documentary, but in particular because his films address the violence and power relations of colonial history in a dialectical optics derived from surrealist principles. Through his reflective filmmaking techniques, Rouch not only recorded events but also became an active participant in whatever event he was filming. According to Rouch, the relationship between filmmaker and subject reached its creative zenith when the filmmaker was able to ‘get into the subject’ – when he slipped into what Rouch called a ‘ciné-trance.’

*Les Maîtres Fous (The Mad Masters, 1955, 24:11 min, DVD)*, filmed in Accra, Ghana in just one day, shows a possession ritual carried out by the Hauka cult. In this annual ritual, 'mad priests' become possessed by the spirits of the white colonial regime. Rouch himself said that we are witnessing one of the 'emotionally powerful cults that mimic, mock, and make the colonial and bureaucratic forms alien'. This filmed ritual also has been variously referred to as an exorcism of sorts, as liberating, excessive mimicry. 'While mastering the Hauka cult, they have resolved, through violent crises, their adjustment to today's world,' says Rouch. Yet the film has also sparked a lasting controversial debate, raising questions about the medium of film and the presence of the camera, which can also be assumed to have fuelled the ritual itself. It is said that the cultists invited Rouch to film their ritual – which not only sheds a different light on the role of the camera's 'gaze' and its presence in the ritual itself, but also on the 'therapeutic' role of the ritual and the question of to whom it is addressed.

# Constanze Ruhm

Constanze Ruhm (1965, Vienna, Austria) lives and works in Vienna, where she is currently a professor at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste. Constanze Ruhm has been working as an artist in relation to the history of cinema for some time. Cinema, in her work, figures as a collective archive, a memory that constitutes present and future imaginaries and social scripts. *X Love Scenes* (2006, 60 min, DVD) is the fifth part of a series. The earlier productions are drafted as interdisciplinary projects and investigate distinct forms of female identities derived from the history of cinematic and theatrical forms and situated in the context of contemporary art practices. This series of projects began with *Coming Attraction / X Characters (In Search of an Author)* – here Constanze Ruhm for the first time ‘released’ canonical female characters from their scripts, setting off a collective process with various practitioners to inhabit the space opened up by this release between the scripted character and their own desires. Developed over various and complex stages, *X Love Scenes* is the last manifestation of this working process.

*X Love Scenes* is based on an ur-trope of cinema: the love scene, here restaged as an unresolved, traumatic, repetitive cycle. An actress, a director and a script girl are on a film set; the male lead is absent. He is replaced by a mark – a white chalk X on a black flag that becomes the actor’s stand-in. While the script girl reads his lines, the actress plays to an empty space. The character of the actress is based on the template of Giuliana from Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Il deserto rosso* (1964). Giuliana, now an actress, has divided herself into a number of sub-characters within the film-in-a-film. These represent new versions of Bree from *Klute* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971) and of Hari from *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972), who were already introduced in *X Characters*. The script girl refers back to Nana from

Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1962), and to the variations developed out of the previous productions *X Characters* and *X NaNa*. The actress and the script girl here appear in their third 'version'. Only the figure of the director has no film historical template. Each of the five sequences tag basic coordinates of a love story – from the first meeting to the final parting – and are always dedicated to one character. The love scenes that are to be performed by the actress refer to their film templates and are rehearsed and shot in ever-new versions.

(Constanze Ruhm)

# Tomas Schmit

Tomas Schmit (1943, Thier, Germany – 2006, Berlin, Germany) was one of the pioneers of the Fluxus movement. During the last 40 years of his life, he created a wide body of work consisting of thousands of drawings as well as writings, books and concepts for artist's books that have been presented internationally. His correspondence with George Maciunas has had a lasting impact on art history, since it opened up the political and aesthetic concept of the Fluxus period to theoretical discussion. Tomas Schmit pulled out of participating in Fluxus actions at an early date and concentrated on his own interrogations, which were continuously obsessed with nature, natural sciences and epistemology. Schmit organised his work in a seemingly paradoxical manner, both indexical and playful, internally coherent and continuously exceeding its own taxonomies. His main aesthetic principle was reduction and simplification; the grand questions of natural science and philosophy appear in his drawings and texts in often humorous, parenthetical or quotidian forms.

Recurring motifs of Schmit's drawings and subject of his investigations were the phenomena of mimicry and camouflage. There exists a large body of work with the motif of the chameleon as well as other phenotypes of mimicry, with which Schmit seems to pose questions of determinism versus open form, and the 'natural' relation between difference and identity (here probably relative to type, category, genre); questions that can also be found at the core of his other works, namely on language and signs.

Within the exhibition *Mimétisme*, Schmit's drawings (2002, series of drawings on paper, various sizes) appear in juxtaposition to 'mentalist' approaches to mimicry as a natural phenomena, as in Jean Painlevé's and Paweł Althamer's work, thus raising and chal-

lenging the concept of theatrical mimesis by playfully positioning similar questions in a quasi-scientific realm of abstraction, where non-sensuous similarity and the structures of language meet (and perhaps stand against) the practices, performance and phenotypes of mimicry.

# Isabell Spengler

Isabell Spengler (1972, Berlin, Germany) works as an artist and filmmaker. Her work is related to the history of underground and experimental filmmaking, often involving performance and various forms of masquerade. For *Telepathie Experiment I (Telepathy Experiment I, 2007, 31 min, DVD)* she collaborated with long-time friend Antonia Baehr. While simple in arrangement, the experiment touches upon basic questions of cinema, visual identification and mimesis. Spengler and Baehr sit in two neighbouring rooms in a school building. Synchronised by a watch and recorded by two cameras, they conduct two ‘telepathy’ sessions of 15 minutes each, in which one acts as a ‘sender’ and the other as ‘receiver’ of the other’s images and thoughts. This experiment is edited and projected on a split screen, so that we follow the working of the two minds in the two rooms simultaneously.

# Erik Steinbrecher

Erik Steinbrecher (1963, Basel) is a sculptor, architect, photographer and image archivist. In his work with photography, he creates sequential montages of motifs reminiscent of encyclopaedias, creating strange new taxonomies. While he refers to an instant everyday aesthetics – borrowing from magazines, pornography, ‘do-it-yourself’ constructions and the like – his work always returns to anthropomorphic effects, paradoxically playing upon the antagonism between anthropomorphic projection and the inanimate world of objects. This mimetic relation is closely linked to sculptural discourse and the way a sculpture may be said to ‘look back at us’. Subject and object seem to change place in his works in surprising and unpredictable ways, stabilised by the comical and fragile order of the quotidian. This effect is amplified on the one hand by the frequent use of pornography – ‘thingification’ and phantasmatic projection in one – and on the other by his showing things in precarious states of decay – makeshift constructions, injured bodies, things left behind, and the like. For *Mimétisme*, Steinbrecher has produced two new works. *Half Gorilla* (2008, offset magazine print, 24 pages) is a folder made of a composition of images from the collection of the artist, free to be taken away, *Superfundi* (2008) a slide projection, delving deeply in the microphysiognomics of quotidian objects and confronting us with mimetic instincts that invoke a possible regression from animated, organic matter to the stillness of inorganic things.

# Javier Téllez

Most of Javier Téllez's (1969, Valencia, Venezuela) works are collaborations with patients of mental institutions. With both of his parents having been psychiatrists in the provincial city of Valencia, Venezuela, giving him an early exposure to mental illness and the institutional system of representing and treating it, Téllez works on notions of identity through the alterity inscribed in the duality of the normal and pathology, inside and outside, the self and the other, based on the conviction that exclusion is the very foundation of authority. Téllez explores madness as a social language, and his theatrical settings uncover the basic mimetic asymmetry in the mental institution, in which the patient's language is always the language of the symptom. 'One of the things that interested me the most,' Téllez says in relation to one of his collaborative works, 'was the patients' ability to "do the voices" of the psychiatrists and other institutional staff. This ability is seldom present on the other side – the language of the institution can never mimic those subjected to its dominant discourse.' In a collaborative effort, exposed to the vulnerability involved in transgressing the borders imposed by the institutional language, his work unearths the potential to counter this asymmetry of power, acting out the institutional power relations in an act of excessive, carnivalesque counter-mimicry. Most of his work includes masquerade as a means to respond *and* expose the language/representation of madness as social camouflage, thus allowing his actors and collaborators a space of intervention their self-representation. Téllez's aim is to create an aesthetics that is also an ethics of difference.

*Oedipus Marshal* (2007, 30 min, DVD) is a 30 minute-long narrative video featuring actors from the Oasis Clubhouse, a psychiatric facility near Aspen, Colorado. Co-written with Aaron

Sheley and developed in collaboration with the actors, the film brings together four elements: the Western, ancient Greek drama (in this case Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*), Japanese Noh Theatre, and mental illness (which is also a topic in Sophocles' narrative of the blinded Oedipus). Here it is put into a structural relation with tragedy and the inevitable failure of the hero. The actors wear masks taken from Noh theatre, where the mask is fundamental to the coded system of representation and can also be understood as a de-personalisation of the actor and enhancement of the structural element. Equally, in the description of Téllez, the mask in *Oedipus Marshal* becomes a tool for resisting the identification and diagnosis of madness through physiognomy, institutionalising implicit social exclusions and norms.

# Barbara Visser

Since the beginning of her career, Barbara Visser (1966, Haarlem, the Netherlands) has dealt with the uncertain relationship between registration and dramatization, and plays with the notions of ‘original’ and ‘copy’ in several of her works. The works are executed in an array of media, such as photography, film, video, text, printed matter and performance. Notions of authenticity and ambiguity in the image and the observer are analyzed within the works. Her images constantly raise the question of whether these copies are ‘well behaved’ and do justice to the original, or whether they are fraudulent signs that swallow up the original in a vortex of delusion. By using existing systems in various ways, and reflecting on them, she challenges the viewer to reconsider ingrained perceptions.

*Philippa* (1998, 4:30 min, DVD) is a work about, and with, Philippa Van Loon, the last heir of an aristocratic family that held important positions in Amsterdam and the Netherlands. The work is set (and was originally shown) in the house of the Van Loon’s, now the Museum Van Loon on Amsterdam’s Keizersgracht, and childhood residence of Philippa Van Loon. Starting from interviews with her about her life and childhood, Visser invited Philippa Van Loon to play herself in the video. In these interviews, Van Loon addressed her trilingual upbringing and the social implications of being part of the Dutch aristocracy, as well as Amsterdam’s social climate in the 70s, and the consequence it had on her own perceptions of class and life. Visser splits Van Loon’s identity and lets her play all three parts herself; set in the Van Loon house as an unsettling slapstick farce, the three characters are never able to meet. And yet it is the heavily decorated house that really seems to play the central role – it is as if the three identities

of Philippa Van Loon are held together merely by the house. The attempts of the mutually exclusive personalities of Van Loon to meet each other also appear as an attempt to escape the confinements of the house's representational interiority, in which a whole social order and ideology is inscribed.



# About Mimétisme

In the science of man and culture today there is a unilateral swerve away from anything that could be called mimicry, imitation, or mimesis. And yet there is nothing, or next to nothing, in human behaviour that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation. If human beings suddenly ceased imitation, all forms of culture would vanish. Neurologists remind us frequently that the human brain is an enormous imitating machine. To develop a science of man it is necessary to compare human imitation with animal mimicry, and to specify the properly human modalities of mimetic behaviour, if they indeed exist. (Rene Girard) <sup>1</sup>

In art the mimetic faculty, long repressed, is emancipated: one no longer need suppress the desire to be 'like' the Other. The realm of aesthetic illusion, or *Schein*, thus frees the subject from his or her otherwise natural compulsion to objectify the Other for purposes of enhanced control and manipulation. Works of art represent a self-sameness that has been freed from the compulsion to identify. (Richard Wolin) <sup>2</sup>

I

Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 7.

2

Richard Wolin, 'Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno's Aesthetic Theory', *Representations*, No. 32 (Autumn, 1990), p. 42-43.

The present exhibition is entitled *Mimétisme*, the French term for mimicry,<sup>3</sup> because of two pivotal works that have been written in French, each of which presents its own theory of mimicry in ways that shed new light on the relation between theatre and the arts. The first is Roger Caillois's 1935 article 'Mimétisme et Psychasthénie Légendaire',<sup>4</sup> published in the surrealist magazine *Minotaure* (the article can be found in the library section of the exhibition along with the other reference material mentioned here). Caillois's essay suggests that insects and humans partake of 'the same nature', thus eradicating the boundaries that are thought to establish a distinct, or properly human, nature.<sup>5</sup> Caillois insists that mimicry is not merely a tactic of survival achieved by making oneself invisible through the act of camouflage. This commonly accepted explanation, says Caillois, is but an observation, and it fails to answer the crucial question: *By what means* does an organism become similar to something else? Caillois thus explains mimicry in terms of perception and psychology – as a temptation

3

In biology, mimicry is known as the phenomenon of one organism assuming the properties of another, or of the environment. These properties can be visual, sonic or otherwise. Mimicry poses multiple questions about an organism's relation with its surroundings – and not the least of these are the aspects of costuming and camouflage, which have led to a wide use of the concept outside biology. Mimicry is a subconcept of mimesis. Outside biology, both terms are often used virtually interchangeably. When speaking of aesthetics, however, the difference is important, as mimesis is a key concept in the history of art. Ever since Plato and Aristotle, mimesis has been discussed as the imitation or representation of nature. The Oxford dictionary defines

it as 'a figure of speech, whereby the words or actions of another are imitated'. It is important to note that there is a fundamental ambivalence in the concept of mimesis: it means both the process of imitation or representation, *and* the product thereof – arriving at an image and the confrontation with it. Mimicry, on the other hand, is defined by the same dictionary as 'the action, practice, or art of mimicking or closely imitating'. However small or questionable the difference may be, it has to be found in the relation to the imitated or represented model. Mimicry is a specific mode of mimetic activity, perhaps one that inhabits this slippery ambivalence and potentially turns mimesis against itself, playing in a somewhat excessive manner on appearance and deception, figure and ground.

by, and assimilation to, space *in the act of perceiving and inhabiting that space*, using and being caught by the magic of mimesis, ‘becoming similar’. This implies understanding mimesis not primarily as pictorial representation, but instead to focus on what Walter Benjamin has called ‘the mimetic faculty’, the ability to cross that most curious boundary of all, between the self and the other, the self and the world.

The mimetic insect becomes similar by means of its perception of space. It can, says Caillois, be compared to a three-dimensional photographic print – a photographic sculpture, if you will – of its surroundings. Mimicry is an excessive state of this condition, a ‘legendary psychasthenia’, as Caillois calls it: a blurring of the boundaries between the self and the environment, a ‘depersonalisation through assimilation to space’. His article has aroused significant debate in art, philosophy and psychology. Numerous works by surrealist artists have been inspired by Caillois’s discussion of the ‘praying mantis’ butterfly.<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan built the

4

Roger Callois, ‘Mimetisme et psychasthénie légendaire’, *Minotaure* 7, 1935.

5

This assumption, crucial to the understanding of mimicry put forward here, is described by Walter Benjamin as: ‘Nature creates similarities. One need only to think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role: See Benjamin, *On the Mimetic Faculty*, 1933. Drawing on Benjamin’s theory, anthropologist Michael Taussig describes

mimesis as ‘the nature culture uses to create second nature’, according to the principle of ‘sympathetic magic’, which ‘grants the copy the character and power of the original, and the representation the power of the represented’. See Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity – A Particular History of the Senses*, Routledge, 1993.

6

See Denis Hollier; William Rodarmor, ‘Mimesis and Castration’, 1937, in *October*, Vol. 31. (Winter, 1984), pp. 3–15; and Ruth Markus, ‘Surrealism’s Praying Mantis and Castrating Woman’ in *Woman’s Art Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 1. (Spring/Summer, 2000), pp. 33–39.

theory of the formation of the ego in the ‘mirror stage’ on Caillois’s propositions,<sup>7</sup> in the paradoxical manner of such depersonalisation through assimilation to space (‘space’ being one’s own image here). Caillois’s article was re-published and subsequently discussed in the journal *October* in 1984 in a series of articles challenging the anti-mimetic paradigm of a canon derived from abstraction and the modernist search for purity and re-examining primitivism and surrealism from a historical perspective. Caillois, next to Lacan, also figures centrally in the book *The Optical Unconscious* by Rosalind Krauss,<sup>8</sup> similarly engaged in rewriting modernism through the historical dialectics of mimesis and the ‘optical unconscious’. Last but not least, Caillois’s article has been a key reference in the emerging discussion in recent film theory on regression and immersion and their respective effects.

A second reference in articulating a theory of ‘mimétisme’ is the work of Louise Irigaray, an influential feminist writer and psychoanalyst. In *Speculum of the Other Women*, Irigaray develops a theory of ‘mimétisme’ as a potential political tool, a feminist practice. She positions mimicry in opposition to the gendered and phallic laws of ‘self-sameness’, to what she calls ‘mimesis imposed’<sup>9</sup>. Since Plato, ‘mimesis imposed’ subordinates women to the mirrors of male signification, and the subsequent regime of truth and authenticity derived from it. Countering this ‘mimesis imposed’ with ‘mimétisme’ (a ‘mimicry unleashed’),<sup>10</sup> Irigaray positions mimicry as a performative concept in the societal regime of gender

7

Jacques Lacan ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I’ in *Ecrits – A Selection*, Routledge, 1977, p. 3.

8

Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, October Books, MIT Press, 1998.

9

Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Women*, transl. Gillian C. Gill, Cornell University Press, 1974.

10

Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, Routledge, 1997.

relations, difference and identity. 'Mimétisme' has the potential to reveal the masks of mimesis, and, crucially, the compulsion to identify, which is also what is at stake in most discussions of psycho-analysis and what has been called 'colonial mimicry'.<sup>11</sup> 'Mimétisme' de-naturalises the *relations* imposed and legitimised by authority. Taking Irigaray's cue, mimicry, as a performative strategy, appears as a means of sending the mimetic address back to the sender, thus de-stabilising the power of signification on which authority is based. This de-stabilisation can be found in feminist performance, in the aesthetics of the carnivalesque, and in surrealism's leanings on savagery and madness, to name only a few trajectories followed in the exhibition.

Most of the works gathered in *Mimétisme* can be understood as articulating an otherwise un-articulable background – that is, the conditions, environment, context or milieu – through mimetic strategies. This seems particularly relevant against the backdrop that these factors and the power relations they enforce are increasingly evasive in times of neo-liberal mobilisation of the individual. For most artists whose work is considered theatrical or an engagement with the theatre, it is not the theatre that is of primary interest, but the laws of imitation and mimetic desire, the difference between acting and being, and the history of the mimetic faculty. The performer is used as a *medium*, speaking the language of, or engaged in a translation of, social space. This language is capable of expressing what is excluded by or escapes signification. It is

## II

See: Homi Bhabha 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, Vol. 28, (Spring, 1984), pp. 125–133; and Diana Fuss, 'Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification', *Diacritics*, Vol. 24, 1994, pp. 19–42.

the dialectical language of the symptom, the language where no language is possible, as a mode of mimetic, relational exchange. It is the language of a bodily knowledge, of the collective unconscious of social space – of affect and the habitual.

Seen from this point of view, *Mimétisme* is ultimately an exhibition about gestures – or the *gestus*, a concept derived from Bertold Brecht and epic theatre. In the epic theatre, the *gestus* describes an overall attitude of a character within its context, a context mediated by the *gestus*. Thus, the *gestus* is a means to express the individual's conditioning by his or her milieu. The performative strategies of a 'mimicry unleashed' are thus about gaining back a relational autonomy in a context where one is deprived of this autonomy. This puts forward a notion of autonomy that is not built on the idea of a subject that is 'context-free', but on the possibility of a reciprocal relation with this context: the ability, political or otherwise, to negotiate the conditions imposed by the context, its norms and narratives.

So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them, this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them; and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>

Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (1725).

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25 January – 30 March 2008  
Opening Thursday 24 January

### **Exhibition**

#### Curated by

Anselm Franke

#### Exhibition architecture

Pieter d'Haeseleer, Kris Kimpe and Bruno Poelaert

#### Production

Lotte De Voeght and Ari Hiroshige

#### Installation

Bart Boussemaere, Benjamin Hertoghs, Caroline Van Eccelpoel, Egon Van Herreweghe, Eidotech, Fernanda Maria Coelho, Géssica Arjona, Jeroen Janssens, Jeroen Van Esbroeck, Jeroen Van Mol, Ken Lau, Lotte De Voeght, Luiz Renato Ferrara, Nikè Moens, Philip Janssens, Steven Elsen, Teun De Voeght, Wilfried Van Hasselt, Wim Catrysse

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